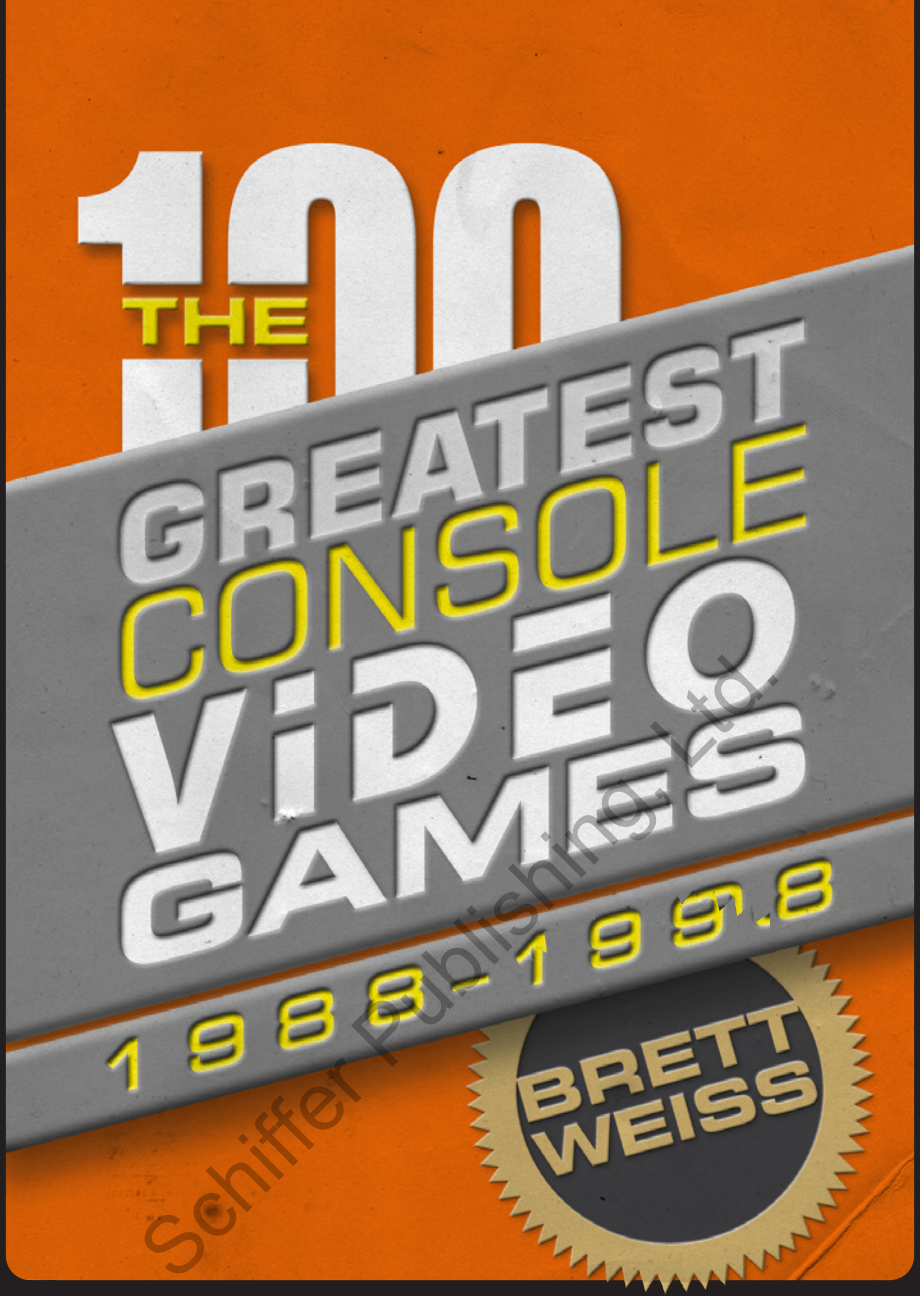

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FOREWORD BY

Chris "the Irate Gamer" Bores

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to James Pledger, a gamer, a good friend, a devoted family man, and an all-around good dude. James edits my YouTube videos, adding images, music, humor, gameplay footage, film clips, and other flourishes. Without James's talent and tireless work ethic, I would just be a vlogger and not a full-blown YouTuber, which is something I thoroughly enjoy. James has also done art for my channel and videos for my Kickstarter campaigns. Thanks, my friend!

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FOREWORD

Video gaming from 1988 to 1998 was an incredible time in the evolution of home consoles. The previous decade molded and popularized the medium with hit after hit, including such seminal titles as *Pitfall!* for the Atari 2600, *Major League Baseball* for the Intellivision, and *Super Mario Bros.* for the Nintendo Entertainment System, but the period this book covers is my favorite era.

While the NES was test-marketed in 1985 and released across the country in 1986, it really began picking up steam in 1987. By 1988, things went into overdrive, as references to the console and its games began working their way into the pop culture landscape at large. My first memory of this was in 1989, while I was watching an episode of *Doogie Howser*. During the show, a new patient at the hospital wouldn't talk to anyone. The only thing that got the kid to open up was when Doctor Doogie began speaking with him about *The Legend of Zelda*.

Beginning in 1987, I dressed up as Mario for Halloween several years in a row. That first year nobody knew who I was. The next year, people one after the other said, "Hey, it's Mario!"

Indeed, America was primed and ready for a new, post-Crash invasion of electronic entertainment. From sitcoms to films to *MAD* magazine and beyond, NES references sprung up everywhere. Networks began airing a host of cartoons, including *Captain N: The Game Master*, *The Power Team*, and *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!*, the last of which also included live action segments.

Boxes of Nintendo Cereal System, featuring fruit-flavored Marios and berry-flavored Links, lined supermarket cereal aisles while Panini produced Super Mario stickers and McDonald's included *Super Mario Bros.* toys with their Happy Meals. One highlight of the NES craze was the 1989 feature film *The Wizard*, featuring a *Super Mario Bros. 3* competition before the game was even released. (The less said about the 1993 *Super Mario Bros.* movie, the better.)

After the above-referenced Great Video Game Crash of 1983, gaming magazines largely vanished, but that didn't stop Nintendo from launching *Nintendo Fun Club News* in 1987. The magazine featured hints, tricks, and, of course, news. The mag was such a success that Nintendo canceled it in 1988 and began publishing the thicker, more elaborate *Nintendo Power*, which began as a bimonthly publication and then quickly changed to a monthly format. I read and reread those magazines cover to cover until the dang things practically fell apart—I wanted to know every detail about the games I loved, and then some!

As gaming entered the 1990s, the 16-bit Sega Genesis (1989) and Super Nintendo (1991) juggernauts battled it out for supremacy in the marketplace, resulting in the famed Console Wars. Systems such as the 3DO, Neo Geo, and TurboGrafx-16 tried to compete with Sega and Nintendo, but they lagged far behind. Growing up, I had no idea Sega existed (no one I knew had a Master System) until the 1991 release of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, the company's faster, edgier answer to Mario.

My uncle had a Genesis, and I went over to his house to play it. I remember looking at the controller and thinking, "Three buttons? What do I need a third button for?" I liked *Sonic the Hedgehog*, but I was especially enamored with 1992's *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*—talk about a game-changer! That holiday season, Sonic and his new sidekick Tails successfully lured me away from the clutches of Nintendo. I was now a Sega fan. The graphics and unique "dash at 'em" gameplay were revolutionary, especially when it came to the fun 3-D bonus rounds.

Seemingly overnight, the blue hedgehog spun his way into the hearts of gamer kids everywhere. Soon he had his own daily cartoon, a Saturday morning cartoon, a comic book series published by Archie, Happy Meal toys, and much more. Then, when *Sonic*

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& Knuckles (1994) came out and featured the whole backward-compatibility thing, that really blew my mind. Plugging *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* into the top of the game to unlock a hidden character was a fascinating concept—I haven't seen anything like it before or since.

Sega released some really great games during this time, including such classics as *Ecco the Dolphin*, *Golden Axe*, and *Streets of Rage*. Their downfall was when they followed up the Genesis with the Sega CD, which was ahead of its time but had too many cringey full-motion video titles, and the Sega 32X, which was a plug-in Genesis upgrade whose games didn't seem all that advanced over what we were already playing on the console. And don't get me started on the botched surprise launch of the Sega Saturn.

Once Sega began sinking, I jumped back over to the Super Nintendo, with its incredible library of games, including *Donkey Kong Country*, *Star Fox*, and *Super Mario World*.

When the Nintendo 64 was released in 1996, I didn't join that bandwagon. The console came out at a time when the SNES was still being pushed to its limits and hit titles were still being released. I always felt like the N64 came out a little too early (even though it was originally slated for release by Christmas 1995). Even third-party developers for the N64 seemed to be going through this weird "growing pains" phase by cranking out a constant stream of games that operated on a similar premise: create a 3-D environment and have their characters run around it in *Super Mario 64* fashion. To me this formula quickly grew old.

Super Mario 64 changed the industry, creating a new genre—the 3-D platformer—in the process, but not in a way that I wanted. As a kid who grew up on 2-D games, I was completely turned off by the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation. I was pulled in the direction of PC games because hit titles such as *Diablo* were more to my liking. By sticking to that comfortable 2-D landscape, it gave me a nice respite from all the 3-D games that kept pounding the console market over the next decade and into the 2000s. I'm sure this is appalling to many of you reading this, but hey, that's okay. There are plenty of 3-D games in this book, and I'm sure they are high-quality titles, but they're just not my cup of tea.

I'm honored that Brett asked me to write the foreword to this book, because most of my favorite games of all time are from this era (3-D titles notwithstanding). While *Dig Dug*, *Q*bert*, Peter Pepper, and Dirk the Daring certainly hold a special place in my heart, so do Mario, Sonic, the Blue Bomber, and Simon Belmont, to name just a few.

I'm sure it was quite the feat to boil down the entire decade into just 100 great titles, but I think I speak for gamers everywhere when I say that the effort is greatly appreciated by anyone who grew up during that era.

—Chris Bores

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Retro gaming expert **Chris Bores**, a.k.a. the Irate Gamer, has been seen on Atari: Game Over, Hardcore Pawn, truTV, and the Travel Channel, and he's been heard on Coast to Coast AM. In 2010, he held the honor of "YouTube's 55th Most Subscribed Channel." Chris is the author of Ghost Hunting 2.0. (2015), a bestselling book on the paranormal.

PREFACE

When I'm a guest author (and now YouTuber) at various video game conventions around the country, including such shows as Classic Game Fest in Austin and the Portland Retro Gaming Expo, the question I get more than any other is "What is your favorite game of all time?" The answer is always *Mr. Do!*, Universal's 1982 arcade game ported brilliantly to the ColecoVision and Super Nintendo (my preferred home versions). If you haven't played this classic maze title, you definitely should check it out.

The next most frequently asked question I get from fans is if I'm going to write a sequel to *The 100 Greatest Console Video Games: 1977–1987*, my first book from Schiffer, published in 2014. That book, which was inspired by the 2009 edition of Bill Warren's titanic tome *Keep Watching the Skies! American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties* (McFarland), has helped me connect with fans like nothing else I've ever written. To this day, I get a steady diet of feedback from readers on what for me was a pure labor of love. Many people tell me it's their favorite book of mine and one of their favorite video game books all of time.

I'm truly humbled and flattered by all the attention the book has gotten, and I had a blast researching for and writing it. In fact, it's the most fun I've ever had writing a book, thanks in part to the fact that all the games in it are, by definition, great. And I LOVE that era of gaming.

When 2020 hit and the lockdowns began due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to finally do what I've been wanting to for quite some time: heed the fans' wishes and start writing *The 100 Greatest Console Video Games: 1988–1998*, which picks up where the original volume left off and covers another super-important decade of gaming. Thanks to advances in technology and game development during the era, most of the games featured in this book are longer, more complex, and more story driven than those in the first volume, which in some ways made it more interesting and more challenging to write. But the key qualification for each game remained the same: it must still be fun to play today, not just historically important (although that certainly plays a role).

During the time frame this book covers, the Nintendo Entertainment System reached its zenith with such awesome games as *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*, my personal favorite in the series; *Contra*, the hardcore platform shooter that popularized the Konami Code; and *Super Mario Bros. 3*, which many players and pros cite as the greatest video game of all time. Do you have fond memories of playing *Tecmo Bowl* with friends and family members? You will of course find that game—one of the most beloved sports titles for any console—in these pages.

In 1989, Sega released the fantastic Genesis console, which would introduce the world to such concepts as "blast processing" (a marketing term created by Sega), "Sega does what Nintendon't," and a certain furry, attitudinal blue hedgehog that quickly became the com-

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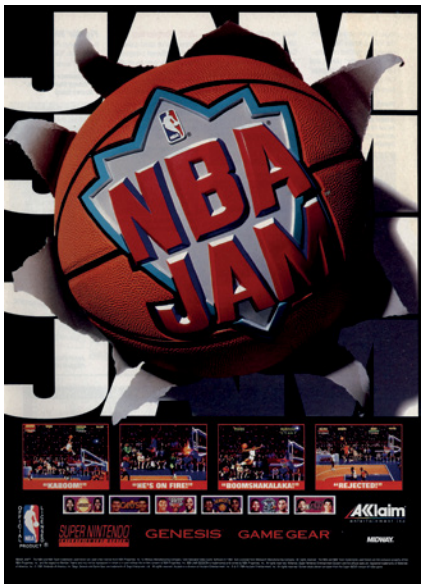
pany mascot. The Genesis originally came packaged with *Altered Beast*, which didn't make the cut here, but the "Genny" is well represented in this book by such titles as *Gaiares*, an amazing hardcore "shmup" with an odd name; *Gunstar Heroes*, a dazzling platform shooter that will make *Contra* fans stand up and take notice; *Mega Bomberman*, my personal favorite in that killer multiplayer series; *NBA Jam*, which is entertainment personified; and of course *Sonic the Hedgehog* (which replaced *Altered Beast* as the pack-in with the console), one of the most iconic video games of all time. The Genesis add-ons even get some love in these pages, with entries for such stellar titles as *Earthworm Jim: Special Edition* for the Sega CD and *Virtua Racing Deluxe* for the Sega 32X.



Nintendo released their follow-up to the NES in 1991 with the Super Nintendo, which regularly shows up at or near the top of "greatest video game console of all time" lists. It is indeed amazing, featuring such legendary titles as *Contra III: The Alien Wars*, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, and *Super Castlevania IV*, each of which carried forward a series featured on the NES and amped it up considerably in terms of graphics, sounds, size, sizzle, and overall awesomeness. The console also boasted excellent role-playing games (RPGs) (such as *Chrono Trigger*), groundbreaking titles (such as *Super Mario Kart*), and games that breathed new life into tired genres (such as *Donkey Kong Country*).

If you aren't super well versed on the Neo Geo, Panasonic 3DO, Sega Saturn, Atari Jaguar, or TurboGrafx-16, no worries—this book features the best of the best for each of these relatively obscure consoles. If you've never played *Metal Slug*, *Devil's Crush*, *Tempest 2000*, *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, or *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger*, I pretty much guarantee you will want to after reading the chapters on these great, often-underappreciated gems. If you're a hard-core gamer you know what I'm talking about.

And then, of course, there's the original Sony PlayStation and the Nintendo 64, consoles that gave us games that countless people of all ages still talk about, collect, and play on a frequent basis today. (You could say that about the NES, Genesis, and SNES as well, but I digress . . .)

The PS1, as it's commonly known, was released in Japan in 1994 and hit the rest of the world in 1995. It brought mature, 3-D gaming into the mainstream, changing the industry forever with such sophisticated titles as *Gran Turismo*, a shockingly realistic racer; *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, a masterpiece coarchitect of the "Metroidvania" subgenre; *Metal Gear Solid*, a stealth game with movie-quality production values; and *Crash Bandicoot*, which showed that the PlayStation could provide simple, charming, mascot-driven family entertainment as well.

Thanks to its air of elegance and refinement, the PlayStation was seen as less of a toy than most previous consoles and was viewed as more of an accepted entertainment device along the lines of a stereo or VCR. For many gamers it was their first CD player, since it was compatible with that then-burgeoning music format. I was extremely impressed with the PlayStation, but as an old-school gamer it was the *Namco Museum* collections that truly sold me on the console and made me plunk down my hard-earned cash. For the first time, I could play pitch-perfect emulated versions (as opposed to close approximations) of classic arcade games at home. (I quickly grew to love many of the system's more advanced/complex offerings as well.)

The Nintendo 64, released in 1996, has been criticized for sticking with the cartridge format, but it has some of the best, most fondly remembered first-party titles of any console. Like *Super Mario Bros.* for the NES, *Super Mario 64* redefined and expanded the platformer genre, this time in glorious 3-D. Despite showing its age, *GoldenEye 007* is a fondly remembered multiplayer game that introduced the concept of the first-person shooter to many gamers who were too young to remember *DOOM* and *Wolfenstein 3D*. And games such as *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Mario Kart 64*, and *Diddy Kong Racing* were just plain fun.

As I mentioned earlier, I had a lot of fun writing this book, which focuses on the US market. I also had a blast editing it. In fact, editing was a HUGE part of the process because, unlike the first *100 Greatest* book, a number of other scribes pitched in on the project and wrote their own essays about important games

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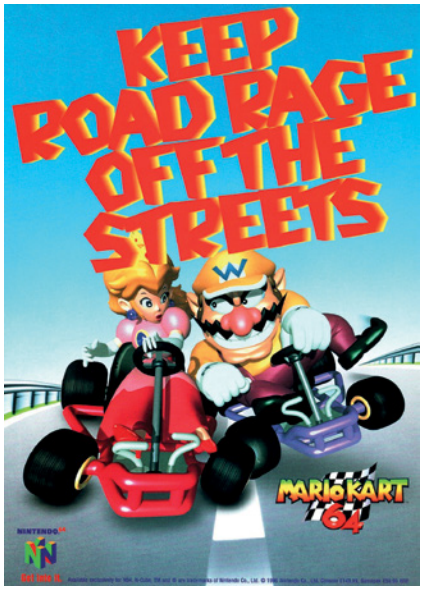
they love. These creators include Greg Sewart, former editor for *Electronic Gaming Monthly*; Shane Stein, executive producer of *Adventures in Game Chasing*; Brian Lesyk, host of the *Pass The Controller* podcast; Kale Menges, a game artist and developer; and Matt Miller, a high-score champion. I included these and other talented folks so the reader would get opinions and nostalgic recollections from a variety of perspectives and not just my own. Plus, I needed writers to do chapters on games that I knew belonged in the book but that I'm not super passionate about, such as *Final Fantasy III*, *Metal Gear Solid*, and *SimCity* (spectacular games, of course, but I prefer more-action-oriented titles). The contributing writers did a fantastic job, and I truly believe you'll enjoy reading their essays as much as I did. This book was truly a collaborative effort!



So how did I come up with the list of 100 games? Good question. As with the first book, whether or not I thought the game holds up in terms of sheer entertainment was the primary determining factor. Graphics, sounds, historical significance, and other factors also played a role, but enjoyment level and timelessness were more important. I did the research, replaying and brushing up on countless games, created the list, and ran it by my contributing writers and my Patrons for their feedback. They offered suggestions, some of which I took. The list is largely the same one I originally drafted, but I did change out a few titles. For example, Brian Lesyk suggested I replace *The Legendary Axe II* with *The Legendary Axe*. Both are great, but he was more passionate about the original than he was the sequel, and he felt it was a superior game. Since he was doing the essay, I complied.

So what about games released from 1988 to 1998 (US release dates) that are clearly top notch but that aren't featured in the book? *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* was edged out by *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Both are amazing and still super fun, but the latter is more historically important (see, historical importance does count for something). Same with including *Donkey Kong Country* over *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest*. I didn't want to feature too many examples of games from the same series for the same console. But then, you might ask, why did both *Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil 2* for the PS1 make the cut? And what about the inclusion of *Streets of Rage 2*—where's the original game? Good questions that we can discuss if I ever see you at a gaming convention. Or you could reach out to me on social media—I'm pretty easy to find. I'd love to hear your opinion on which games I should have included but didn't and which ones shouldn't grace these pages but do. In other words, tell me where I went wrong!

Now, I'd better wrap up this lengthy rant so you can get to reading about what you came for—the games!

—Brett Weiss

PS: If you enjoy my work, please check out more content at www.brettweisswords.com. There you can find articles and reviews, as well as links to my books, Patreon page, social media, and YouTube channel. Enjoy!

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CHAPTER 1

ALADDIN, DISNEY'S

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: VIRGIN GAMES
1 PLAYER
1993

In 1994 I had ZERO interest in anything Disney related. As a metalhead teenage boy, I was way too cool for any Disney Princess foo-foo nonsense. However, my buddy Mike kept telling me how I NEEDED to see *Aladdin* since it had just come out on VHS. I was shocked that my hard-rocking brother-in-arms kept going on and on about this kid's movie. I blew him off. Later that summer, he finally got his hands on the Sega Genesis game that had come out late the year before. I had seen several articles about it and had to admit that it did look impressive, but I had NO desire to play it. And then he brought it over for me to see in person. I was absolutely AMAZED at how gorgeous the game looked, how well it played, and how great the music sounded. I was hooked. After playing the game I admitted defeat and watched the movie, and it remains my favorite Disney film to this day.

Programmed by David Perry (*Earthworm Jim*), the game went into development in January 1993, and the team was told that they needed to finish by October of that year, which didn't give them as much time as usual, especially for a game as important as this one. There were rumblings in the press at the time that Virgin had something special going on with the game and that Disney themselves might even be involved.

Then, at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) that year, fans got a glimpse at how big the release was going to be.

According to an article in the August 1993 issue of *Game Player's Magazine*, the panel featured Virgin founder Richard Branson, Virgin Games president Martin Alper, Sega of America CEO Tom Kalinske, and Disney Studios chairperson Jeffery Katzenberg. Not only did they discuss how Virgin was given exclusive use of more than 250,000 original animation cels, but also that ten of the original animators for the movie created 1,500 new animation cels just for the game. With their presentation and the playable demo they had at the show, the buzz over *Aladdin* was huge.

Aladdin sticks fairly closely to the plot of the movie. You play as the titular character. Armed only with your scimitar and apples you pick up along the way, you must fight your way through 10 stages, most of which are taken straight out of the film, from the streets of Agrabah, to the Cave of Wonders, and even inside the Genie's bottle. You finally make your way back to the palace to confront the evil Jafar and save Princess Jasmine so that you can ride off into the sunset with her on your trusty Magic Carpet.

Overall the game is a standard platformer with largely linear gameplay, but the action does scroll vertically at times. There are side routes leading to bonus items, including the aforementioned apples, gems (for using in shops), extra lives, Genie tokens (for playing a slot bonus round), and Abu tokens (for unlocking a special pot-dodging stage starring Abu the monkey). The game controls well, but sometimes the camera zooms in a little close, and that can make it hard to tell exactly what is coming up in front of you. Given the excellent graphics, you can get past that issue quickly. Even just running and jumping around in the first level can be a lot of fun because the action is animated perfectly. Since the game was made with the help of the actual Disney animators, you really do feel like you are controlling the movie, which was a real treat at the time.

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The music really stands out as well. Since I didn't see the movie until after I had played the game, I was looking forward to hearing how the songs were supposed to go. After seeing the movie, I was that much more impressed with how well the music in the game turned out. Donald Griffin and Tommy Tallarico did an excellent job not only in bringing the Disney originals to life, but also in composing original songs. These are terrific tunes that match the rest of the music so well, I was surprised that they weren't in the film when I finally saw it. In fact, the game-exclusive songs are the ones that I get stuck in my head as opposed to those from the actual movie.

Even though I was uninterested in the game when I read about it in 1993, I knew Disney having a hands-on role in development was a big deal. The game impressed me when I finally saw it for myself, and it is one of my favorite titles on the Genesis. The magazines at the time also gave the game high praise. *Electronic Games Monthly* named it their "Best Genesis Game for 1993" and also gave it the award for "Best Animation."

While the Genesis version of *Aladdin* was programmed by Virgin Games in collaboration with Disney Software, the Super Nintendo rendition was handled by Capcom. There are quite a few differences between the games, including the fact that Aladdin is always armed with a sword in this version. In the SNES game he needed to jump on enemies to kill them. Both cartridges exude high quality, but the Genesis game has a more cinematic feel, whether you're talking animation, backgrounds, or characters. As such, the Genesis game is more fondly remembered today.

FUN FACT:

The team at Virgin developed a new process they called "Digicel," allowing them to digitize and program the animation cels with the same amount of power that would normally be used in two or three cartridges at the time into just one. This allowed the game to run at 60 frames per second, which was virtually unheard of at the time.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Aladdin is one of the greatest movie-based games of the 16-bit era. Not only is it relatively faithful to the film on which it is based, it is a blast to play. It sold more than four million copies, making it the third-bestselling Genesis cartridge of all time, behind only Sonic the Hedgehog and Sonic the Hedgehog 2. This game was definitely "One Jump Ahead" of most titles of the era.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming-4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast

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CHAPTER 2

BANJO-KAZOOIE

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: 3-D PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RARE, LTD.
1 PLAYER
1998

The intensity of the competition of late 1990s gaming platforms hit a high point with the rivalry between the Nintendo 64 and the original Sony PlayStation. Things came down to platform-exclusive titles that defined each console's capabilities and garnered gamers' loyalties. While Nintendo's primary strategy for their 64-bit platform was perhaps somewhat flawed, the company had a development juggernaut in the renowned British game studio Rare, Ltd. Alongside Nintendo's own revolutionary first-party titles such as *Super Mario 64* and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, Rare provided Nintendo with a variety of groundbreaking games that pushed the Nintendo 64 hardware to the limit. When the visually astounding 3-D action platformer *Banjo-Kazooie* hit stores in June 1998, gamers were finally given a proper look at what Nintendo's 64-bit, cartridge-based system was truly capable of.

I first saw *Banjo-Kazooie* in person on a demo kiosk at Toys "R" Us the first weekend of summer vacation in 1998. Having just finished our junior year of high school, my friends and I blew our final summer as "kids" doing almost nothing but playing video games. We played a ton of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Diddy Kong Racing*, and *GoldenEye 007* well into the wee hours of each morning.

Even though we'd read about *Banjo-Kazooie* in *Nintendo Power* a few months prior, we still weren't entirely sure what to make of the game when we first saw it. We were confused as to how the funny little bear from *Diddy Kong Racing* merited an entire game of his own, but after only a few minutes of play I was sold. I was absolutely blown away by the game's graphics and audio. I'd never seen a console game with such vibrant animation and effects. It looked more akin to a 3-D animated movie than a mere video game. Rare's intent during development was indeed to capture the feel of a Disney film but with edgier humor.

Banjo-Kazooie became my time killer for the remainder of that summer and into the new school year as I waited patiently for the release of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* later that fall. Ironically, I was initially disappointed with *Ocarina of Time*'s graphics because of just how good *Banjo-Kazooie* looked. This effect was even more pronounced for my friends, who were diehard PlayStation fans. The gauntlet had been thrown down and the bar had been raised.

Originally planned as a Lucas Arts–styled adventure game for the 16-bit Super Nintendo, *Banjo-Kazooie* took quite the journey on its path to becoming one of the Nintendo 64's crown jewels. "Project Dream," as the game was initially known, featured prerendered ACM (advanced computer modeling) graphics like *Donkey Kong Country* and followed the adventures of a young boy looking for treasure and fighting pirates. The main character went through a few more iterations, including a rabbit and eventually a bear, before the project was shelved after being deemed too ambitious for the 16-bit hardware.

When Rare's focus shifted to the Nintendo 64, Project Dream was dusted off, but after seeing the success of *Super Mario 64*, Rare decided that a full-on 3-D platformer would be a better direction. The game's concept evolved into infusing the gameplay of *Super Mario 64* with the attitude and visual stylings of *Donkey Kong Country* and would star Banjo the bear. As development progressed, the idea of embodying some of Banjo's unlockable abilities, such as flying or extreme

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jumping, in an entirely separate character took form, eventually resulting in the creation of Kazooie, a long-legged, trash-talking bird that lived in Banjo's backpack.

Early in development, the programmers created a powerful texture memory management tool that allowed the game to load more, and higher-detailed textures than the Nintendo 64's native architecture was capable of, giving the game a visual quality never before seen on the system. This innovation helped the game earn the "AIAS Award for Outstanding Achievement in Art/Graphics" the year after its release.

The story of *Banjo-Kazooie* might not be Pulitzer material, but it does a great job of subverting classic fairy-tale elements with a twist of undeniably British humor. The wicked witch Gruntilda (Grunty)—a loathsome, haggard wretch with the typical warty nose and pointy hat—is overcome with jealousy after asking her magical cauldron who was the fairest in the land. Upon hearing that the answer is Tooty, the ditzy, pig-tailed little sister of Banjo the honey bear, the enraged Grunty devises a way to steal the young bear's beauty for herself and sends her henchman Klungo to capture Tooty. Banjo happens to be taking an afternoon nap when he is rudely awakened by a squawking Kazooie as Tooty is nabbed by Klungo and taken away to Grunty's lair high atop Spiral Mountain.

Banjo, with Kazooie nestled in his backpack, must set out to rescue his little sister and put a stop to Grunty's mischief. Along the way, Banjo and Kazooie are helped out by various characters, such as a voodoo shaman named Mumbo Jumbo, a nearsighted mole named Bottles, and even Grunty's own sister, who passes on all manner of gossip about the rhyming villain (take notes!).

The game is riddled with mature humor and dialogue, accompanying challenging and well-designed gameplay throughout. Along the way, Banjo and Kazooie will occasionally need Mumbo Jumbo's magic to transform into various creatures, such as a termite, a walrus, and even a honeybee, to reach new areas or find hidden secrets otherwise inaccessible. Additionally, they must collect Jiggies, which are golden puzzle pieces that unlock the entrances to the game's various realms. Each realm must be thoroughly explored to acquire new abilities and collect even more Jiggies to reach the top of Spiral Mountain and confront Grunty herself. Each beautifully rendered realm has multiple objectives that reward Banjo and Kazooie with Jiggies upon completion. Collecting golden musical notes and rescuing Jinjos are constant objectives throughout the game. Jinjos are small, colorful creatures that have been tormented and scattered throughout the game's realms

by Grunty and her minions. All the rescued Jinjos ultimately show up to help Banjo and Kazooie in their final showdown with the wicked witch.

While the core game design is heavily inspired by *Super Mario 64*, *Banjo-Kazooie*'s play control is every bit as tight and responsive, which is surprising considering the wider variety of abilities at Banjo and Kazooie's disposal. The camera system, while not quite as user

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friendly as Mario's, is still one of the best in the Nintendo 64 library, excellently balancing the presentation's emphasis between gameplay and showing off the environmental artistry. Combined with fantastic character designs and animation, the large and colorful levels have a much more organic feel to them than *Super Mario 64*, seeming more like actual places in a cohesive world than merely arbitrary play spaces in a video game. Ranging from a grassy, termite-infested hilltop to a sandy crab-covered beach, a dank and dreary swamp, an icy mountaintop with freezing winds, a searing desert with quicksand and ancient ruins, a fantastically entertaining haunted house, and even an enchanted forest seen across four different seasons, the levels run a gamut of creativity and visual splendor. All this is accompanied by a dynamic and rich musical score composed by Grant Kirkhope.

Even the "game over" sequence is a pleasure to experience. The actual ending, a climactic battle against Grunty flying around on her broomstick atop Spiral Mountain, is a visual tour de force of special effects and graphical prowess, culminating in a blatant setup for the cleverly titled sequel *Banjo-Tooie*, which released in 2000.

Winner of the "AIAS Console Action Game of the Year" award in 1999, *Banjo-Kazooie* would go on to sell nearly two million copies for the Nintendo 64. While the game might not have as much overall content as *Super Mario 64*, it more than makes up for it with personality and polish as a natural evolution of the genre and an excellent demonstration of the gaming magic Rare was so often capable of on Nintendo hardware.

FUN FACT:

In true Rareware tradition, Banjo-Kazooie is loaded with entertaining cheats. Once you've completed all of Bottles the Mole's bonus challenges, go to the sand castle in Treasure Trove Cove and enter the password "WISHY WASHY BANJO" to turn Banjo into a bouncy washing machine!

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

With amazing graphics and audio, Banjo-Kazooie wasn't just the next step in the evolution of 3-D platformers after Super Mario 64, it raised the bar across the board for Nintendo 64 games. It demonstrated Nintendo's promise for the hardware's capabilities arguably better than any previous title on the system.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist

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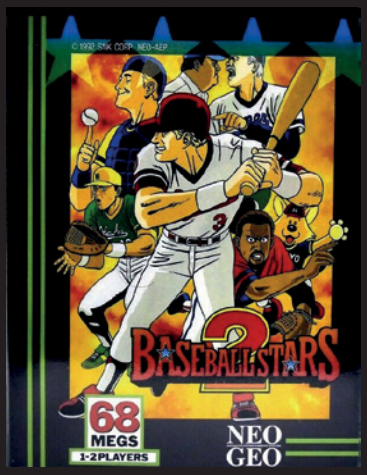
CHAPTER 3

BASEBALL STARS 2



NEO-GEO
GENRE: SPORTS/BASEBALL
PUBLISHER: SNK
DEVELOPER: SNK
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

In the earlier days of the video game console era, the yardstick by which new systems were measured was how close they came to reproducing arcade-quality experiences. The reason many gamers loved *Donkey Kong* for the ColecoVision and NES is because both ports looked, sounded, and played much like the original coin-op version (despite containing only three of the four game screens). Conversely, the primary reason *Pac-Man* for the Atari 2600 is so vilified is because it looks, sounds, and plays almost nothing like its arcade counterpart.

During the 8- and 16-bit eras, arcade games set an unreachably high standard in terms of technological achievement due to their relatively complex, expensive, single-purpose hardware. Large, dedicated printed circuit boards pushed the limits of the arcade game's graphical capabilities. Elaborate, high-quality stereo speakers made the auditory experience come to life. Proprietary microswitch joysticks, steering wheels, foot pedals, and even bicycle handle input controls served to further enhance the arcade experience.

Early on, home consoles could only do their best to reproduce that which arcade machines could do—and to widely varying degrees of success. In other words, you could play the original *Space Invaders* game at your local arcade and then play a port of *Space Invaders* on your Atari 2600 at home. Were they similar? Yes. Were they identical? Absolutely not!

In April 1990, SNK Corporation became the first company to officially bridge the technological gap between arcade and home consoles with the Neo Geo systems—the Neo Geo MVS (Multi Video System), which served as the arcade variant, and the Neo Geo AES (Advanced Entertainment System), which served as the home console variant. The MVS and AES shared the same 24-bit hardware, so for the first time ever there was virtually no difference between the arcade and home versions of a game (aside from the MVS versions supporting coin/token recognition). Most of us didn't own a Neo Geo AES due to its hefty price tag. Even by today's standards, $650 is a big ask to shell out for a video game console. If in the likely chance you wanted to buy an actual video game cartridge to go along with that console, it would set you back $200 to $350 *each*. Most of us were content to save our quarters and feed the MVS.

The Neo Geo is predominantly known for producing extremely high-quality games for two primary genres: fighting games and shoot-'em-ups. But the console is oftentimes criminally overlooked for its sports games. In fact, sports titles represent the second-most-populated genre for the Neo Geo. *League Bowling*, *Windjammers* (Frisbee dodgeball is a sport, right?), and *Baseball Stars Professional* were among some of the titles that redefined what sports video games could look like and how well they could play. Two years after the Neo Geo's debut, it would receive what is widely considered one of the finest sports titles of the era.

Baseball Stars 2 was the follow-up to 1990's *Baseball Stars Professional*. It did everything important the prior game (and many other baseball video games) did, but amplified the volume across all criteria. One or two players can choose from 18 teams across two fictional leagues to compete in nine innings of America's favorite pastime. Everything here is bigger, badder, louder, and more animated.

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While keeping intact the tried-and-true mechanics that have well-served prior baseball video games, *Baseball Stars 2* strives for a more action-oriented, over-the-top presentation. Characters are modeled with intensity in mind. The pitcher grins with ferocity under the brim of his cap before hurling some 95 mph heat in the direction of the impossibly muscle-bound batter who looks more like Charles Atlas than Charles Comiskey—all achieved via a series of inset windows displaying close-ups of the players.

Perhaps the most eye-catching and unique aspect is how the game cuts to brief animations or snapshots as punctuation to a particularly exciting moment. If a runner is particularly close to a baseman making a catch at a base, the screen cuts to a brief animation of the umpire waving his hands and yelling "SAFE!" or thumbing the runner "OUT!" A successful diving catch cuts to a dynamic shot of the outfielder making the play. After his third strike, a frustrated batter might break the bat over his knee Bo Jackson style. The pitcher chews gum (or something) as the batter defiantly bobs at the ready. These visual pops add flavor and excitement.

Another added advantage with the Neo Geo's advanced hardware was its onboard Yamaha YM2610 sound chip, which provided the system with 15 channels of sound. While this accounted for some fantastic musical scores, the real standout was the incorporation of digitized voice the likes of which we had rarely heard in prior games—arcade or otherwise. *Baseball Stars 2* makes use of this capability by including bits of commentary from a disembodied commentator. And while it's a far cry from the running real-time commentary heard in more-recent sports games, *Baseball Stars 2* represented a quantum leap forward in that direction.

Fashioned more in the spirit of a pure arcade-style sports game and less as a sports simulation, *Baseball Stars 2* doesn't take itself too seriously, à la *NBA Jam*. It's a great sports game, for sure, but it also appeals to gamers who may not necessarily love the sport of baseball. That might be *Baseball Stars 2*'s greatest achievement—getting gamers to take a chance and throw some quarters into an arcade game that looked and sounded so impressive that they didn't give a second thought to what genre they were actually playing. And for baseball purists, *Baseball Stars 2* is high art tribute to Abner Doubleday's creation. If you've played only the more popular NES version (which was titled *Baseball Stars II*) you have to try this one, even if you have to emulate it.

FUN FACT:

Hitting a home run produces a celebratory overhead shot of your player(s) rounding the bases and tagging home. He's greeted by his fellow teammates and . . . a fox mascot? Yeah, apparently it doesn't matter which team you choose; your mascot is always a fox for some reason.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

At the technological crossroads of where arcade machines were finally being met, and eventually surpassed, by home console hardware, Baseball Stars 2 represented a redefining point. It took a game more than a century old and injected it with digital personality, depth, and beauty. In the premier issue of GameFan magazine, two reviewers scored Baseball Stars 2 with 99% and 97%, stating it is "far and away the best sports game I have ever played" and concluding that it had "the best graphics, sound, and gameplay this side of ESPN."

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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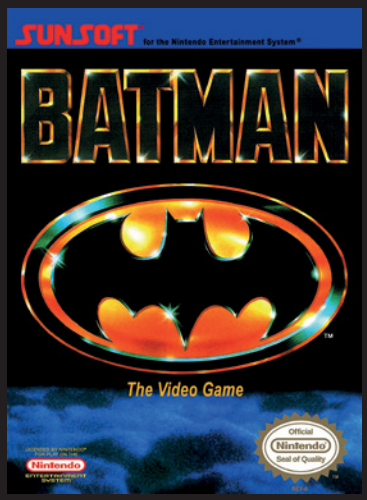
CHAPTER 4

BATMAN: THE VIDEO GAME



NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT/PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: SUNSOFT
DEVELOPER: SUNSOFT
1 PLAYER
1990

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Finally, Hollywood treated Batman, a.k.a. the Dark Knight Detective, with dignity. Even as late as the 1980s, and even in the wake of Frank Miller's seminal *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), many still associated the character with the silly (if beloved in some circles) Adam West TV show, which ran for three seasons from 1966 to 1968. But Tim Burton and company brought the character from camp to classic with 1989's dark, serious, and violent (relatively speaking) *Batman*, starring a surprisingly good Michael Keaton in the title role, gorgeous blonde Kim Basinger as Vicki Vale, and Jack Nicholson as the obvious choice for the Joker.

Leading up to the movie I bought all the cool merch I could find, from trading cards to action figures to a wall clock. I already had a Batman T-shirt (I was geek long before it was chic), but I snagged a few more. While on a trip to visit family in East Texas I bought the novelization of the movie weeks before the film's debut. In short, I was plenty stoked the debut weekend of June 23, when I saw the film in a packed house of cheering Batman fans. I was not disappointed—I was thrilled, in fact—and have seen it many times since. My only real complaint was the fact that the stiff, bulky costume Keaton wore limited his neck movement, making some scenes look a little awkward.

When *Batman: The Video Game* for the NES hit stores in 1990 it was a no-brainer purchase, since I was not only a big Batman fan but a huge Nintendo nerd. Part beat-'em-up, part platform shooter, and all awesome, the game entranced me from beginning to end. Or at least almost to the end. I never did beat the Clown Prince of Crime (the final boss), despite playing the game for countless hours. He's one tough Joker.

According to the game's story line, which is loosely based on the film, the denizens of Gotham City are planning the city's 200th Anniversary Festival. Unfortunately, the Joker is the "city's evil leader," which of course is never a good thing. Crime and violence run rampant, and only Batman can save the day. The intro looks terrific, from the nicely rendered characters to the sleek and stylish Batmobile, setting the stage for the action beautifully.

As an agile, fun-to-control Caped Crusader who is purple to distinguish him from the black backgrounds, you run, jump, and battle your way through five exciting, multilevel stages: Gotham City, AXIS Chemical Factory, Underground Conduit, Ruins of Laboratory, and Cathedral. Much more athletic than Keaton's portrayal of Batman, you'll dodge electric currents, ride conveyor belts, deal with Deadshot, confront Killer Moth (who shoots fireballs), face Heatwave (who totes a fire gun), fight K.G. Beast (who attacks with a sword and shurikens), joust with Javelin (who attacks with a long spear), and dodge and destroy homing mines, jet-pack-donning soldiers, and bomb-dropping claws. While certain characters and situations will be familiar to fans (Deadshot, for example, is a DC Comics supervillain, but he wasn't in the film), many of the enemies and scenarios have nothing to do with the Batman mythos of the comics or movie.

In addition to punching bad guys, robots, and the like, Batman wields three selectable Bat weapons: a spear gun that fires slow rockets, a dirk that shoots in three split directions, and rapid-fire Batarangs. Punching works well for battling certain enemies, but it's a blast and super crucial to be able to shoot enemies that are out of arm's

reach. Ammo is limited, but you can pick up more throughout the game. You can also grab heart icons for health. Batman's abilities to kneel and wall-jump (à la Ryu Hayabusa's wall scaling in *Ninja Gaiden*) are important as well. If you care about points you can collect bonus items.

Batman is easily one of the better superhero or movie games of the era. The graphics do an excellent job capturing the dark, psycho-somber tone of the film, and the music, though unfortunately not reminiscent of Danny Elfman's film score, is nonetheless engaging and conducive to gameplay. There's a wide variety of well-animated villains constantly after Batman, and although many are slightly too easy to dispatch early in the game, the tough-as-nails bosses at the end of each level more than make up for it. Many consider the game to be "Nintendo-hard."

In 2004 the Jaded Gamer (thejadedgamer.com) wrote, "Even though there are quite a few difficult areas of extreme aggravation (which was fairly common back in the NES days), the overall atmosphere of the game makes *Batman* succeed. True to form, Sunsoft has created another high-quality game with this title, and at the same time they've created one of the very few movie-licensed games on the NES that's worth owning."

Steve Harris of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* praised the game overall in the April 1990 issue, but he did have one complaint. "Batman consists of splendid game play that is coupled with dark graphics and backgrounds," he wrote. "I'm sure this is done to capture the mood of the movie, but it does detract a bit from the overall appeal of the title. The intermissions are well done and there's plenty of challenge and play value here."

Batman: The Video Game was supposed to ship in 1989 in time for the holidays, but it was pushed back to early 1990.

In *Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman* (2014, SCAR Productions), Rob Strangman interviewed Jay Moon, former software development manager at Sunsoft America, about some of the difficulties of working on the game. It was the first title Moon worked on for Sunsoft. Here's the relevant part of that conversation:

Rob: I've heard that Jack Nicholson was the reason Batman *was delayed originally because the in-game Joker looked nothing like him. Any truth to this?*

Jay: That is not the way I recalled how it happened. Jack Nicholson and Michael Keaton were pretty easy to deal with. Now Kim Basinger was another story. The development team for Batman *were a talented group of guys, but they had a very difficult time staying within the parameters of the* Batman *movie license. So, yes, we missed our Christmas shipping date; however, we did ship in late January and still sold over a million copies.*

Rob: There is a prototype of Batman *that surfaced with entirely different cutscenes than the game that was released. Any memories of that?*

Jay. Well, yes, I do remember that. Sunsoft Japan were always sending me different prototypes. I know the one you are referring to, and I believe Warner Bros. didn't like the cutscenes. Those ROMs are floating around on the web.

Mr. Moon also worked on *Batman: The Video Game* for the Sega Genesis, but that version is quite a bit different from this one (not to mention easier). The Game Boy version is different as well, and it is the NES game that the majority of Bat-fans remember most fondly.

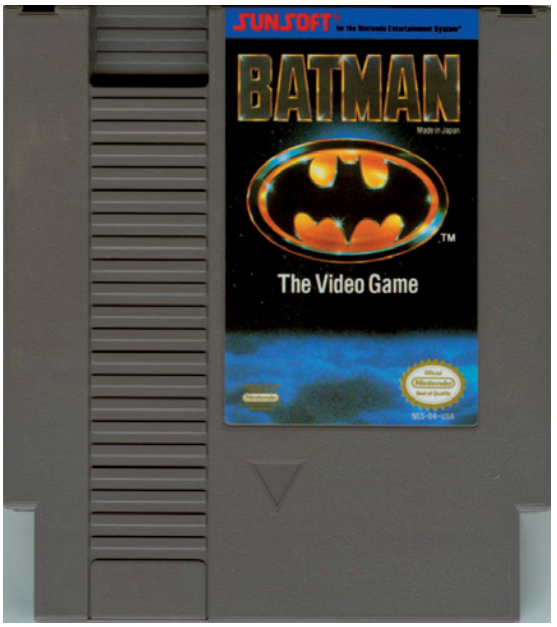
FUN FACT:

In the Game Boy and Genesis versions of Batman: The Video Game, you can take flight in the Batwing for a little side-scrolling shooter action.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

In addition to being one of the better movie-based and superhero games of all time, Batman: The Video Game is just good plain fun. Solid controls, detailed graphics, and challenging (if frustrating at times) gameplay make for a Bat-tastic combination.

—Brett Weiss



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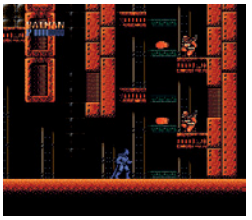

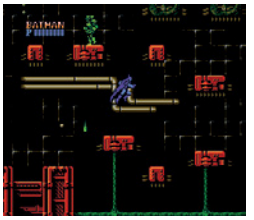

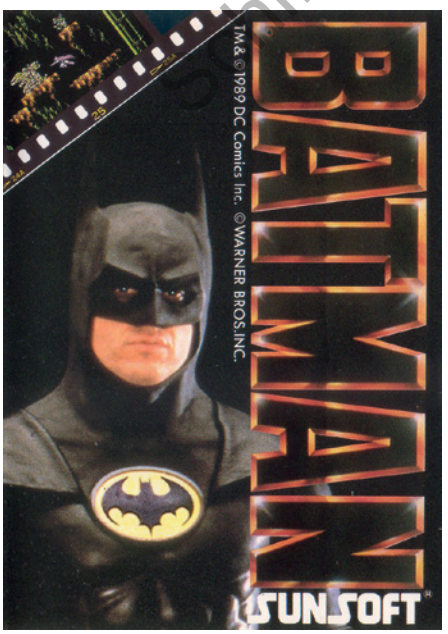

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CHAPTER 5

BLAZING LAZERS

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: VERTICAL-SCROLLING SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: HUDSON SOFT / NEC
DEVELOPER: COMPILE
1 PLAYER
1989

The shoot-'em-up—or scrolling shooter, or even "shmup" if you're so inclined—has been around since the early 1980s. I don't think it's too far outside the margins to say that, more or less, they're all pretty similar. Shoot-'em-ups usually feature all-out war, with huge explosions and lots of bad guys everywhere. And they also usually have the good guys sending a single spaceship to wage war against the encroaching armada. No, that doesn't make much sense, but just go with it. These are usually one-player affairs, after all, and AI buddies are apparently a space bridge too far, even now. Since those early days of the genre, things have changed considerably, with the insane "bullet-hell" shooter becoming more commonplace. But even so, the core principles remain. There's shootin' to be done, and you've gotta scroll across the screen to do it.

When you talk about console shoot-'em-ups, there's one that far and away tops the heap for me. That, of course, is *Blazing Lazers*. I realize that there are probably more than a few people reading this who are wondering what *Blazing Lazers* even is. That's okay, since it originally saw release on the relatively obscure TurboGrafx-16. A niche console from NEC that sought to bridge the generation gap from 8 to 16 bit, the TG16 is a sleeper of a system with great games that I have fond memories playing. Yes, I was lucky enough to get one for Christmas back in the day, and I had a small but played-to-death library of games for it. *Blazing Lazers* was one of those, and it remains to this day my most-played shooter from any era.

I've never been a huge fan of the genre, but *Blazing Lazers* is an exception, since no other shooter has ever clicked for me the way it has. When *Blazing Lazers* debuted at the tail end of the '80s, it was a revelation. It looked about a million times better than any NES shooter, and that was saying something, since the NES had some good-looking blasters. The TG16 wasn't really capable of SNES-quality graphics, but it featured inarguably better visuals than the NES, which was the market leader for console gamers at the time. The SNES, featuring gorgeous shooters such as *Axelay* and *U.N. Squadron*, didn't debut until '91.

Blazing Lazers casts you as the pilot in command of the Gunhed Advanced Star Fighter. The name of said ship actually comes from the Japanese version of *Blazing Lazers*, which is called *Gunhed*. And that, in turn, comes from a movie that the game is based on. Or is it? What exactly does *Blazing Lazers* have to do with *Gunhed*? Not much, as Kurt Kalata with Hardcoregaming101 explains:

> In Japan, the game is a tie-in with the live-action mecha movie *Gunhed*, which is Japanese produced, despite using a largely English-speaking cast. How are the two related? Well, they really aren't. Other than featuring the Gunhed mecha on the title screen, and featuring a transforming ship in the intro, there are absolutely no other connections. In fact, the mecha doesn't even appear anywhere in the game.

In *Blazing Lazers*, you commandeer the Gunhed against the foul forces of the Dark Squadron, a super-high-tech force of, uh, bad guys. (Again, just go with it—this is a shooter from 1989, remember.) The Dark Squadron has an eight-pack of megaweapons that

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they're poised to make use of, and that's not a good thing for the galaxy.

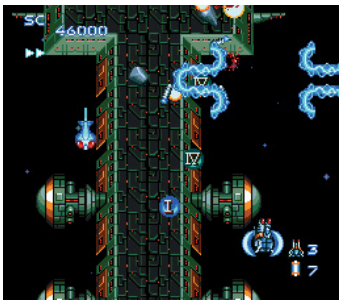
While they have their super-duper ships, you have an incredible array of hardware that's almost as impressive. One of the coolest things about *Blazing Lazers* is that the weaponry you wield is flat-out awesome. Running the gamut from standard bullet-type projectiles to beams of pure energy that arc out and eradicate everything in front of your craft, this game revels in letting you execute as much wanton destruction as possible.

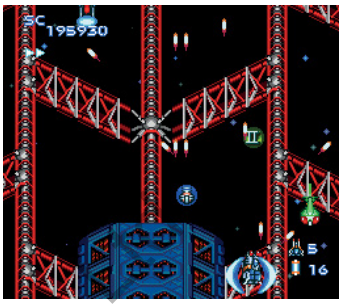
The game isn't stingy with its weapons, and you'll find tons of possible upgrades in each level. In fact, you'll get so many that you'll have to pass some up, just to keep the weapons that you have. That's something I do quite often when I have a maxed-out hardware set. As you play, you'll see blastable pods floating on and off the screen all over the place. The thought is that you'll need that constant stream of upgrades (and you will) to make your way through the levels. On top of that, you can grab checkpoint markers (rare), extra lives (even rarer), and bombs that wipe out almost everything on the screen at once.

In addition to weapon upgrade pods, *Blazing Lazers* throws secondary weapon packs at you, including homing missiles. One of my favorite things to pick up are multibodies. Essentially drones that fly around your core ship, multibodies move and shoot as you do, adding a tremendous level of firepower to what you've already amassed. They also use the same load-outs, so if you've been building up your beam weapon (as I recommend without hesitation) then they'll fire that as well. There's no shortage of things happening on the screen at any given time, though this is not a bullet-hell shooter. It's not even close, actually, and when you lose (and you will), it likely won't be because of failing to thread the needle in the midst of that particular brand of insanity.

While it's not a bullet-hell shooter, it is one of the best shooters for any console, shoving the TurboGrafx-16 as close to 16 bits of glory as it ever got. It's just as playable today as it's ever been, and I still fight through chunks of it a couple of times each year. More than just for the memories, I'm still playing it because it's simply a darned good time. Heck, I've never actually beaten it—I just love trying!

At this point there are a few ways to play, with the Turbo-16 mini plug-and-play console having the game loaded up, as well as a dwindling number of digital storefronts out there offering it. Not the most commonplace of titles for certain, but it is possible to get hold of a copy if you so desire. And you certainly should.





When *Blazing Lazers* released in '89, it received a score of 96% from *Computer and Video Games* magazine, with writer Paul Glancey tagging it with a bombastic "anyone on the quest for the ultimate shoot 'em up—this is it! THIS IS IT!!" *Dragon* mag also reviewed the game and scored it with a hearty five stars.

VideoGames and Computer Entertainment magazine said it would "keep you going for hours," which I certainly agree with. More recently, the likes of Kotaku, IGN, and GameSpot have praised *Blazing Lazers* as being good to great.

Even rapper Kanye West doled out some love to *Blazing Lazers*. In a now-deleted tweet, West said that the game "was probably my favorite game on that console," in reference to the TurboGrafx-16, which the rapper and business magnate had growing up. I can't disagree one bit, Kanye.

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FUN FACT:

While there is no official sequel to Blazing Lazers, there almost was. And unlike most scrapped sequels, it's a game you can actually play. The shooter that would become Super Star Soldier was originally considered for a "Blazing Lazers II" by NEC. In the end it was not to be, and that game would become its own thing. Blazing Lazers fans should enjoy Super Star Soldier since the games are similar.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Blazing Lazers is a shoot-'em-up classic that's oft overlooked when recounting the best games of the genre. If you've played it, though, then you know it's unquestionably deserving of being in the same breath as the greats. It manages to look good and holds on to every bit of its fun factor more than three decades postrelease.

—Jason Micciche, writer and editor in chief at BrutalGamer.com

CHAPTER 6

BONK'S ADVENTURE

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NEC
DEVELOPER: RED COMPANY / ATLUS
1 PLAYER
1990

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Killer launch and pack-in titles are keys to success for a fledgling console. The TurboGrafx-16's pack-in game upon its 1989 North American launch was *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones*, an average (at best) platformer that didn't help sell many consoles. Less than a year later, NEC released *Bonk's Adventure* exclusively (at least initially) on the TurboGrafx-16. The company instantly had a new mascot, plus a top-tier platformer for its struggling system.

Bonk originated as a comic strip character in a Japanese magazine dedicated to the PC-Engine (known as TurboGrafx-16 elsewhere). There he was known as PC-Gengin—a pun on the console's name, in addition to being roughly translated as "primitive man." It was only a matter of time before his popularity as a comic strip character would transfer over to game development. Red Company, which created the magazine's PC-Gengin character, and Atlus came together to create *Bonk's Adventure*.

In an article published on www.nintendolife.com, Ken Wirt, who served as vice president and general manager of the TurboGrafx-16 Group at NEC Home Electronics from 1989 to 1991, revealed some info about the name change:

> In the US, a slang term for hitting something is to "bonk" it, so we renamed the game *Bonk's Adventure*. Of course, in England to "bonk" means something entirely different, so our advertising campaign for this title got a lot of attention in Europe. We even had a commercial campaign in the US with the slogan "Bonk for President," and that was printed on T-shirts and other marketing materials. I think if eBay had existed at that time you would have seen a lot of sales in the UK for those shirts!

A brave and strong cave boy from prehistoric times, Bonk is on a mission to rescue Princess Za from evil King Drool (a gigantic green dinosaur) and return the brainwashed residents of Moonland to their homes. This rescue mission takes Bonk through various colorful and engaging environments such as volcanic islands, forests, ice worlds, and even inside the body of an enormous dinosaur. The level designs create a whimsical and unique experience for gamers as they battle a plethora of prehistoric creatures, both real and imagined.

As you might expect from a cave boy named Bonk, he uses his enormous bald noggin to head-butt enemies from the side, above, or below. If you can pull off an acrobatic spin attack from above, the damage to enemies is even greater. The most important move to master is the spin attack. It requires perfect timing to execute, but Bonk can float in the air, perpetually spinning in a circle if you can pull it off. This move is useful in staying above large enemies, such as level bosses, but it can also help you reach hidden areas housing secret items.

It's certainly amusing to see Bonk jump up and use his head like a dive-bombing battering ram, but *Bonk's Adventure* is chock-full of humorous visuals. For example, he forgoes the standard hands-and-feet approach to climbing walls. Instead, Bonk uses his teeth to gnaw and gnash at the ground until he reaches his vertical destination. Consuming slabs of meat doesn't only make Bonk invincible or stronger, it first turns him an angry shade of beet red, with a mushroom cloud of smoke steaming out of his split-open skull. Less amusingly, when Bonk dies, he falls on his back and foams at the mouth, which is kind of gross. These are just a few examples of the charm and humor infused into what could have been a routine action adventure title.

The gameplay is standard side-scrolling platforming, with five stages culminating with often-large and challenging prehistoric end bosses. These bosses are residents of Moonland that have been brainwashed by King Drool. They need Bonk's help in smashing the helmets on their heads, turning them back into peaceful and friendly creatures. After being turned back to normal, they each thank Bonk in their own creative and sometimes humorous ways.

The in-game music has a Pacific island sound, and the synth lines seem to have a bit of an echo, giving the tracks a unique feel. I could never mistake the music in *Bonk's Adventure* for anything else, except for maybe its sequel, *Bonk's Revenge*.

Bonk's Adventure allows for infinite continues, but if your game ends you have to start at the beginning of each stage, no matter which section you were at when you died. That would be like starting over from level 8-1 if you die in the castle level 8-4 in *Super Mario Bros.* The length of each stage varies, which is odd. Some stages are very long, while others are short. For example, stage 2 goes all the way to level 2-7, while stage 4 goes only to 4-1 before meeting the level boss. This lack of consistency keeps you guessing, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Once you reach the end of the game, you must run the gauntlet of level bosses (similar to the *Mega Man* games) before reaching the game's sub-boss and final boss, King Drool.

After the original title's success on the TurboGrafx-16, it was natural to expand the Bonk franchise into sequels and introduce him to other consoles and handheld gaming systems. The game was ported to the Commodore Amiga and the NES/Famicom before getting a complete overhaul for the arcade and Game Boy.

In terms of proper sequels, *Bonk's Revenge* was released the following year on the TurboGrafx-16. *Bonk 3: Bonk's Big Adventure*, a CD-ROM title, was an exclusive for the TurboDuo. Finally, *Super Bonk* saw the mascot switch console allegiances for a release on the Super Nintendo. The legacy of the little guy with a head as hard as concrete was cemented (pun intended) with these releases in the early '90s.

Having never owned a TurboGrafx-16 when the console was new, I could only imagine how fun *Bonk's Adventure* would be on the basis of its intriguing television and print ads. It was clear to me at the time that Bonk was aiming for Mario and Sonic territory, and I couldn't blame NEC for going for that demographic. It had worked for Nintendo and was currently working for Sega. I wasn't exactly sure how hitting your enemies with your head would work out as a gameplay device, but it sure looked cool. And I discovered that, indeed, it was.

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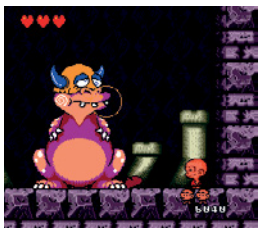


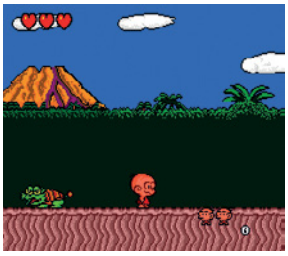
FUN FACT:

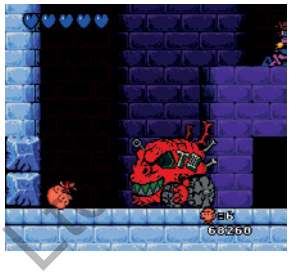
Released in several other worldwide markets, besides the aforementioned PC-Gengin title he received in Japan, the character of Bonk went by BC Kid in PAL territories.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Bonk's Adventure is packed with eye-popping visuals and quirky humor. It's both fun and addictive with simple controls, and most importantly for Hudson Soft and NEC, Bonk became the face of the console. Bonk had the personality to challenge Mario and Sonic in the 16-bit wars. Ultimately it wasn't enough, but for a few years in the early '90s, Bonk was the bald-headed man-boy that represented the TurboGrafx-16. The developers held up their end of the bargain by creating a standout title and a must-own for any action platforming fan.

—Jason Breininger, retro-gaming writer and music podcaster





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CHAPTER 7

CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
1 PLAYER
1990

The first memory I have of seeing an animated film in theaters is the 1975 rerelease of the 1937 classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. My mom took us kids to see it, and I was mesmerized. Two of my all-time favorite movies are *Pinocchio* (1940) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). And, like seemingly every child my age, I grew up adoring Mickey Mouse cartoons and *The Mickey Mouse Club*. In recent years, I wrote an extensive cover feature about Mickey Mouse for *AntiqueWeek*, where I have a monthly column. And, of course, our family subscribes to Disney+,

the company's streaming service. In short, like millions and millions of others, I'm a big Disney fan.

When it comes to video games, the Disney name usually equals top quality, whether it's *DuckTales* for the NES; *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mickey Mania: The Timeless Adventures of Mickey Mouse* for the Genesis and Super Nintendo; the Kingdom Hearts series for various consoles; *Epic Mickey* for the Wii; or far too many others to mention. The one I return to more than any other is *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse*, which, like so many other games in my collection, I purchased on the cheap at FuncoLand back in the late 1990s. It's such a pleasant, inviting, and relaxing game that it's virtually impossible not to enjoy.

While dancing in the meadow one clear spring day, Mickey and Minnie Mouse are startled by a sudden covering of gray clouds over the blue sky. As Mickey turns to tell Minnie not to worry, a flash of lightning blinds them both. In the blink of an eye, a wicked witch named Mizrabel snatches Minnie and takes her back to the Castle of Illusion. She intends on exchanging her own evil visage for that of Minnie's beauty.

So, yes, you do have a clichéd "rescue the damsel in distress" story line, but that's how gaming often goes.

As Mickey Mouse, you must run, jump, swim, and otherwise make your way through five relatively brief but beautifully themed areas of the castle, looking for the Gems of the Rainbow, the only power strong enough to defeat the evil witch. The five levels include The Enchanted Forest, Toyland, The Storm, The Library, and The Castle.

Throughout the game you'll be mystified by enchantments, oddities, and illusions, each designed to foil your rescue. You'll swing from lamps, swim past obstacles, ride on moving leaf platforms, swing over pits (à la Pitfall Harry), bounce up high on springs, run down slopes and across crumbling bridges, float on sugar cubes, dodge giant boulders and buzzing toy airplanes, and much more. Creatures such as clowns, toy soldiers, bonefish (which leap and snap), armored knights, trees, and mushrooms will make your trek semichallenging. You can rid the screen of these creepy critters by bouncing on them or by throwing apples, marbles, or candles. Ammo is limited, but these items are scattered throughout the game and easy to acquire.

Mickey handles well, is extremely lifelike, and is very nicely animated. The way he holds his hands behind his back and shakes his hips from side to side when he is not walking is great—it's such a Mickey thing to do. Also, the fact that you bounce on enemies (push another button after you jump to attack) is enjoyable and unusual for the genre, where so often you simply jump on bad guys. And I like that Mickey can jump and bounce relatively high into the air. Oftentimes it's strategic to bounce on an enemy to reach an otherwise unobtainable item or platform. There are blind jumps at times, but this is one of my few gripes with the game.

In an interview published on gameinformer.com in 2013, *Castle of Illusion* director Emiko Yamamoto spoke about the jumping mechanic:

> When we were testing the game, we felt that just having the jump happen automatically without input didn't make players feel like they were the one doing the jumps. One of the key elements [is that you] can bounce from enemy to enemy in a row—adding that timing mechanic and input made the players feel good and in control . . . with Mickey's jump, we wanted to fully express his body movement so we added more frames of animation. As a result, his jump ended up being longer than a jump would be in a normal game, so we had to design the levels so that the distance of his jump worked.

For such a simple platformer, *Castle of Illusion* has plenty of neat moments and surprises. One of the most interesting is in level 2, when the screen flips upside down. It gives you a whole new perspective on the action, putting your eye-hand coordination to the test and adding new strategies.

Graphically, *Castle of Illusion* really shines. Many of the background scenes are gorgeous and the characters look great. Check out the toy soldiers and the spiderwebs—you'll be impressed with the detail. The coloring is nice as well. The deep shades of green in the trees and the pastel colors of Toyland really stand out. The music is solid, but none of the tunes are particularly memorable. From a technical standpoint the music gets a high grade, but you probably won't be humming the tunes the next day.

When 16-bit consoles were getting long in the tooth, and those early PlayStation and Nintendo 64 games came out, I remember thinking games like *Castle of Illusion* looked much better than most of what the next-gen consoles offered. I hated to see 2-D, which gaming companies had pretty much perfected, get pushed aside in favor of 3-D, which was in its infancy and still rough around the edges (and often in the middle).

Luckily, regardless of how advanced and cinematic three-dimensional games have become, we can always go back and play classics such as *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse*, a fun, bouncy, colorful, lighthearted game that anyone can enjoy.

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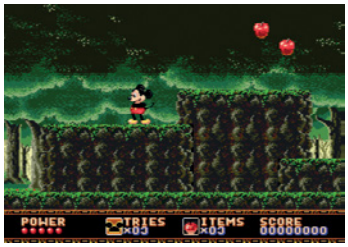

FUN FACT:

A different version of Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse was produced for the Master System and Game Gear. It is similar thematically to the Genesis cart but features different level designs and play mechanics, such as keys for opening doors and treasure chests filled with coins, extra lives, and health power-ups.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Like Felix the Cat for the NES, Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse is one of the most pleasant and relaxing platformers you can play after a long, stressful day at work. It's challenging enough to keep you on your toes, but easy and cartoonish enough that young kids can enjoy it.

—Brett Weiss

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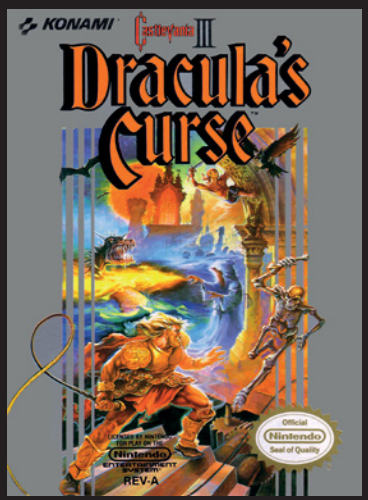
CHAPTER 8

CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 PLAYER
1990



Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse was one of my most anticipated games for the NES. I was a fan of the series since the original *Castlevania*, and I had been waiting for the chance to play it ever since I saw it grace the pages of *Nintendo Power* and *Game Player's Strategy Guide to Nintendo Games*. I got the cartridge for Christmas 1990, and it lived up to my every expectation and then some. It looked better, sounded better, and played better than I thought it would, and it provided a challenge that few games could.

The action takes place in 1476, which is more than 200 years before the events of the first game. This is

interesting, because this is around the time that the real Vlad "the Impaler" Dracula Tepes died, tying the game into actual world history, which is a nice touch. You play as Trevor Belmont, ancestor to the first game's protagonist, Simon. Through Dracula's sorcery he has brought evil into the land of Wallachia, and the people have turned to you to stop Dracula and his plans to conquer the world.

In terms of gameplay, Trevor handles like his counterpart, Simon. You are equipped with the holy weapon of the Belmont clan, the Vampire Killer. You can attack your enemies with it or a number of subweapons that you can equip: a dagger, an axe, a boomerang, a watch that stops time, or holy water. Along the way, Trevor can pick up one of three allies to join him in his journey to stop Dracula: Grant Danasty, a pirate with acrobatic abilities that allow him to move swiftly, jump high, and cling to walls and ceilings; a sorceress named Sypha Belnades, who can cast powerful spells in place of the subweapons that the other players use; and Alucard, the son of Dracula, who can turn into a bat. Each playable character has their own strengths and weaknesses, allowing the gamer to decide how they want to play and giving it a great deal of replay value. Speaking of deciding how to play the game, there are also branching paths throughout the adventure, providing incentive to go back and play it again to see what the other paths are like on your way to Dracula's Castle.

Castlevania III exudes high quality, especially for its time. According to an article on Shmuplations.com, one of the reasons that it pushed what the NES could do was because the director of the game, Hitoshi Akamatu, wanted to outdo the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* games that Konami was also developing at the time. The Ninja Turtles were Konami's highest seller overseas, so they got priority over all their other projects. (Akamatu felt that the potential for further *Castlevania* sequels on the Famicom and NES was there, but due to the popularity of the Ninja Turtles, they were pushed to the side.)

The introduction of the three extra playable characters also came from this desire to make the game bigger. The article states that "the multiple characters came from trying to figure out a way to both return to the roots of the first game while expanding the scope of the game." Akamatu's love of film is also credited with the top quality on display in the three *Castlevania* NES games, the third title in particular. The article goes on to say that "the visuals and music were so good because they were made by people who consciously wanted to do something cinematic." This is seen in the game's opening, which starts with a film roll while epic music plays along with it.

As great as this game was to American audiences, many feel that its Famicom counterpart is superior. Armed with a coprocessor chip that composer Hidenori Maezawa helped create to add two extra channels of music to the game, the Famicom version, which hit stores in 1989, has a much-broader sound. Since the NES version couldn't have this chip installed, Maezawa had to downgrade the music for the US release.

In addition to the extra sound channels, the Famicom version is easier than the NES game. For example, the character Grant attacks with a short dagger for his normal attack in the US release, whereas he throws a dagger in the Japanese version, giving him a much-better standard attack. You don't take as much damage throughout the Japanese game as you do in the US version, and the final battle with Dracula is easier. If you die while fighting Dracula in the US game, you start back at the previous section, and at the beginning of the stage if you need to continue. In the Famicom game, you start at the base of the stairs leading to Dracula's Keep if you die or continue. The Famicom version is available on the *Castlevania Anniversary Collection*, which was released by Konami in 2019, and it is a must play if you are a *Castlevania III* fan and have never tried the Japanese release.

Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse was well received when it debuted and is still highly regarded today. *Nintendo Power* ranked it as the ninth-best NES game, IGN put it at fifth on their "Top 100 NES Games" list, and Games Radar ranked it as the eighth-best overall NES title. Longtime *Castlevania* director Koji Igarashi has even said that it is his favorite game in the series.

One example of the game's staying power is that it was the premise for Netflix's *Castlevania* animated series. Even though the show deviates from the NES favorite, you can see the game's influence all over the TV-MA-rated cartoon.

While *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse* is hard to beat, helping define the phenomenon known as "NES Hard," it is worthwhile to seek it out and play it any way that you can.

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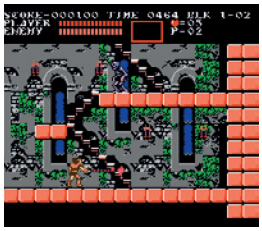

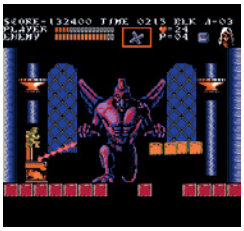

FUN FACT:

The Belmonts fight with a whip because series director Hitoshi Akamatu loves Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), and because he thought it was a great weapon to repel enemies.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Thanks to tight controls, one of the best soundtracks of its era, and the fact that it is one of the most-beloved, most-challenging games in a fantastic series, Castlevania III deserves to be on any list of greatest games of all time.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming-4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast

CHAPTER 9

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER/ADVENTURE/RPG
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 PLAYER
1997

Who would have thought that a 2-D game released during the eighth generation of video game consoles—an era full of groundbreaking 3-D games—would help define not only said generation and the console that it was released on, but also an entire genre of video games? But that is exactly what *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* did. Originally released to relatively little success, the game eventually took off and gained a cult following over the years and helped influence countless games that came out after it. Years after the game's debut, the term "Metroidvania" would be applied to any game that came out that resembled *Symphony of the*

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Night and the Metroid series, for their nonlinear gameplay that put emphasis on exploration and backtracking to previously seen areas with newfound equipment.

When *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* launched in 1997, I had no idea it had come out. Luckily, I went with a buddy of mine in college to go rent some PS1 games a short time later and stumbled across it. As a fan since the original *Castlevania*, I was surprised and excited to see a new entry in the series. Once I played it, I quickly realized that this wasn't my usual journey into the Devil's Castle. The game opens with a call back to the direct predecessor of *Symphony of the Night*, *Rondo of Blood* (a fact missed by most American players at the time since it was released only in Japan), where you take control of Richter Belmont as he confronts Dracula in his all-too-familiar keep.

After that battle is won, the true game starts, where you play as the half-vampire son of Dracula, Alucard, previously seen in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. It will become obvious to you very quickly that the linear progression you've become accustomed to in most of the previous games is gone, but you are now playing much in the same style as what many consider to be the black sheep of the series, *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*. You have stats that increase through battling enemies and gaining experience, items and weapons to find and equip, magic spells and shape shifting at your disposal, and a whole castle to explore while you put your new skills and items to the test to unlock new areas.

Symphony of the Night began as a Sega 32X game. Since the system's sales were poor, the concepts that were started were shuffled over for the game that Konami would make for the new Sony PlayStation. One of the things that the writer and assistant director of the game, Koji Igarashi (or Iga), was striving for with this game was accessibility. He knew the reputation that the earlier games had for being very difficult, and he wanted to make a game that anyone could play.

In a translated interview from the official Japanese strategy guide for the game (found on Shmuplations.com), Igarashi was asked about the things he took into consideration when making a new *Castlevania*. He said, "With *Symphony of the Night*, our concept was to make a game that would overturn players' ideas about *Castlevania*, yet also feel like a *Castlevania* game. As for what we specifically wanted to change: make the action exploration-based (although *Castlevania II* did this), add RPG elements so anyone who put in the effort could beat it, no more one-hit kills, the player character would not use a whip, no more stairs [I mean stairs in the style of the previous *Castlevania* games], and change the visual style. So our biggest concern was how, using these new ideas as a base, to create a game that would fit cleanly into the timeline and world of *Castlevania* and not harm the image of the previous games in the series."

One of the primary things that the game is known for is the revealing of—SPOILER!—the Inverted Castle, which shows up once you "beat" the game a certain way. In a bit of a twist partway through the game, you discover that Richter Belmont, whom you saw at the beginning of the adventure, is now the new Lord of the Castle. When you reach Dracula's Keep, instead of fighting the fanged foe that you are used to seeing, you are now confronted by Richter. Once you defeat him, the game ends and you're left with a feeling of "Is that it?" This was by design.

In the same interview, Igarashi was asked about the percentage completion of the game. "It's actually 200.6%," he said. "What we were thinking is that people wouldn't defeat Dracula on their very first playthrough; we wanted them to defeat Richter once. Then, after feeling like they'd beaten Richter and cleared the game, they'd decide to aim for 100% completion in the normal castle and uncover all the places they didn't get to; in doing so they'd discover the Inverted Castle and feel like they'd found something special. When players defeated Richter we wanted them to be wondering, 'What happened to Death? What about all of Alucard's stolen equipment?'"

Knowing how I felt once I got to that point, I have to say that they nailed this aspect of the game perfectly.

The Castlevania series is known for having amazing soundtracks, and *Symphony of the Night* is no exception. It was composed by Michiru Yamane, who has become synonymous with the franchise. *Symphony of the Night* was the second game in the series she worked on, but it's easily her most famous. The music varies in range and style, from classical to jazz to techno and even to heavy metal. The song that plays over the end credits, "I Am the Wind," is a big musical standout for the game, but not in a good way to most. Written by Rika Muranaka and Tony Haynes and performed by Cynthia Harrell, the easy-listening song is one of the most divisive parts of the game. While some enjoy it, most have a strong disdain for it and have wondered how it ever made its way into a *Castlevania* game.

Regardless, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* is largely above reproach and is easily one of the greatest games of all time.

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FUN FACT:

Koji Igarashi was originally involved only with the story writing and programming. He was given the title of assistant director when the game's original director, Toru Hagihara, was promoted to head of the division. Igarashi would go on to be the go-to guy involving all things Castlevania from this point forward, earning the moniker of "Godfather of Castlevania."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Symphony of the Night is always in the discussion for "Best PlayStation 1 Game" and "Best Castlevania Game," and it usually places on "Best Game Ever" lists. It was 16th on IGN's "Top 100 Games of All Time" and fourth in their "Best PlayStation Games of All Time." It ranked 24th in Game Informer's "Top 200 Video Games Ever" feature, and the lists and accolades go on and on. While games were doing nonlinear exploration prior to the game's release, very few did it as well as Symphony of the Night.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast

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CHAPTER 10

CHRONO TRIGGER

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT
DEVELOPER: SQUARESOFT
1 Player
1995

Few games hold the titanic weight of 1995's *Chrono Trigger*, a Japanese role-playing game centered on preventing a world-ending disaster through time travel in an imaginative fantasy world. It has been cited by countless players and critics as one of the greatest games of all time, one grafted from the blood and sweat of a dream team of SquareSoft's finest developers and partners. Part *Dragon Quest* in visuals (thanks to the iconic character design of Akira Toriyama) and part *Final Fantasy*, *Chrono Trigger* captivated imaginations with expressive characters, enchanting music, and engaging yet simple storytelling. The battle system stood out among other RPGs by having battles and enemies exist in the overworld, rather than a separate gameplay dimension for fights. Even in 2020's *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, there are features that trace back to *Chrono Trigger*.

Chrono Trigger is filled with timeless elements, making for enjoyable gaming well beyond release, with just enough detail for players to fill in the gaps. For instance, dialogue is not especially robust, but there is still plenty of emotion to pull from when combined with the cartoonish character animations and accompanying musical themes. There are many ideas and concepts that can be pulled from or injected into *Chrono Trigger*. Thankfully, the game is much shorter than many of its contemporaries at about 24 hours of playtime, allowing almost anyone to find the time to fully experience the timeless classic.

I discovered *Chrono Trigger* in my teens while poring through every SquareSoft game I could get my hands on. At the time, *Final Fantasy IX* led me to explore the entire franchise and any other game with the SquareSoft logo. Since the company was starting their trend of keeping legacy titles alive through ports, I played most of the series on the PlayStation. Friends would loan me various titles, and I picked up *Final Fantasy Origins* from Toys "R" Us for a delightful $20, but one game of this style stood out as unique. That title was *Final Fantasy Chronicles*, which bundled *Final Fantasy IV* and *Chrono Trigger*.

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Like many kids my age at the time, I was enthralled by the world of *Dragon Ball Z*, so the animated opening of *Chrono Trigger* had my attention immediately. A friend of mine was familiar enough with the game but never beat it, so one day we gathered up a weekend's worth of snacks and drinks with the goal of completing Chrono's journey. We were admittedly held back by the frequent loading found in the PlayStation release, and we repeatedly unsuccessfully faced down the kaiju-like calamity known as Lavos.

Lavos's cry, a screech that echoed across space and time in Chrono's world, would haunt me for almost 20 years.

Of course as I matured, I revisited various classics from my youth, but for whatever reason *Chrono Trigger* never made it to the top of the list. I knew the plot and the various endings, thanks to many well-made essays from people such as The Completionist, MatPat of Game Theory, and countless podcasters and journalists, but I never saw the finality of the adventure for myself. That is, until taking on the essay you are reading now, where I loaded up a friend's copy and buried myself in everything *Chrono Trigger*. In about a week I successfully overcame Lavos and watched with glee as a satisfying conclusion played out.

Playing the game this time around, I noticed some things I hadn't years ago, thanks to my experience with literature analysis and game critique.

At the outset of the adventure, I couldn't help but laugh at how funny *Chrono Trigger* is to play. There are several interactions that are humorous in setup, such as the early trial where all of Chrono's actions are minutely examined by a court hellbent on imprisoning him. The various minor villains are often bumbling buffoons, triggering their own traps or being easily manipulated by other characters. A time gate is even in a closet where Chrono and his friends interrupt a family's dinner.

Player expectation is constantly challenged as well, both in narrative and gameplay. One notable moment of this involved meeting the muscle-bound dinosaur Nizbel for the second time; Nizbel just stands there and gives Chrono a chance to save, only for the beast to barge in from behind to start the fight. This sort of scenario happens frequently, keeping even JRPG (Japanese role-playing game) veterans on their toes. It's a brilliant bit of design that plays into just how lean *Chrono Trigger* is compared to other JRPGs.

While players will assuredly laugh at times during the game, *Chrono Trigger* also has sharp moments of dread and sorrow. Entering Magus's castle is a moment of sheer foreboding oddity. As the music dies away, monsters squall in the distance. Doppelgangers of other characters wander the halls aimlessly, and only after seeing certain sections do they shed their skin and fight as monsters. This haunted house breaks away when facing Ozzie for comedy but crashes back into horror and determination as players face down Magus, the powerful wizard that killed a party member's dearest friend and who could be the origin of Lavos. Of course, we later learn that Magus was merely attempting to tap into Lavos's otherworldly power, and that the wizard was not originally from this time period. Players are even faced with extreme loss in the death of a major character, which leads into a branching set of paths to take in the final act.

I also realized just how important names are in *Chrono Trigger*, something that fantasy novels and classical plays have explored in detail. Frog abandons his name of Glenn, feeling utterly defeated by Magus and a monstrous shell of what he used to be. Marle is quickly discovered to be Princess Nadia, who abandons her royal duties to save the world from Lavos. Robo is later learned to have been called Prometheus, a machine designed to assist in keeping humans in check for Mother Brain's nefarious programming. In the main cast alone, four out of the seven have stories involving names.

Oddly enough, the names of the game's creators can be found outside the credits. *Chrono Trigger* was unique in its approach to replayability with New Game Plus and multiple endings. Players can keep their items and levels, allowing for experimentation and tackling Lavos at various points without fear of utter defeat. In a meta ending, Chrono can interact with caricatures of the developers. While this was meant to be silly in nature, I now find it sad. Several of these devs talk about how challenging creating this game was, with many citing adverse health effects from working too hard. One dev talks about becoming a zombie. Another says they lost weight.

Game development can be one of the most grueling creative endeavors on the planet. Even now, many companies are considered to be driving their creatives into the ground without care of how many bodies are sacrificed for the game and profits. Work conditions are improving as more and more of these atrocities are exposed, but it is still relevant enough to warrant concern.

While I am sure that the creators of *Chrono Trigger* are proud of their work and elated to see how it connected with players, I can't imagine many of them wanting to do that sort of work again in similar conditions. *Chrono Trigger* may have left considerable scars on those who created it.

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Fans of the game have been eager for a proper sequel, or at least continued ports of the game. We have seen the game improved considerably on the Nintendo DS, where the script was updated and additional content was added, but it is shocking to see *Chrono Trigger* absent from every major platform outside of PC. The two games considered connected to *Chrono Trigger* are even harder to play outside of emulation: *Chrono Cross* and *Radical Dreamers*.

Chrono Trigger may be in danger of fading away from mainstream pop culture, but its legacy can be felt in the various games and projects inspired by it.

Published by Square Enix but developed by Tokyo RPG Factory, both *I Am Setsuna* and *Lost Sphear* have elements of *Chrono Trigger* but arguably miss the mark by a wide margin. One of the closest experiences I've found is *Cosmic Star Heroine* from Zeboyd Games, a title that leans more into the science fiction genre but is clearly taking notes from *Chrono Trigger*. A promising title that has yet to release as of this writing is *Sea of Stars* from Sabotage Studio, the same team behind the incredible platformer *The Messenger*. I also found thematic, visual, and gameplay similarities in *Romancing SaGa 2*, *Fernz Gate*, *Crystal Ortha*, *Radiant Historia*, *Destiny Connect: Tick-Tock Travelers*, and *Black Sigil: Blade of the Exiled*, just to name a few.

There have also been rom hacks that attempt to bring the updates of the DS version into a SNES rom, as well as a few story-driven hypothetical scenarios dreamed up by dedicated fans. Unfortunately, many of the more ambitious and vocal attempts at remaking or reimagining *Chrono Trigger* have resulted in legal action. Even the game's music is frequently explored through projects such as OverClocked Remix, which features multiple albums such as *Chronology: A Jazz Tribute to Chrono Trigger* and *Chrono Symphonic: A Cinematic Interpretation*.

Outside of these examples, there are echoes of *Chrono Trigger* throughout all of gaming.

We may eventually see a third entry, since there was a canceled title called *Chrono Break* that could be revisited. Considering how vocal fans of *Chrono Trigger* have been since its release, it is only a matter of time before those voices are at least considered. With Square Enix being a giant in the games industry and their efforts of funding smaller RPG projects, this is certainly within the realm of possibility.

Regardless of how daunting and massive *Chrono Trigger* may appear, it is an extremely approachable JRPG that is perfectly playable decades after release.

It may be somewhat challenging to track down, but there are at least the affordable Steam and mobile versions; many fans argue that the best version of the game is on the Nintendo DS, but I actually found the SNES version to be my preferred way to play. Some ports are objectively better than others, but the game holds up no matter how it is played.

Traveling through time to stop a titanic disaster is a timeless tale, and the memories made along the way will always be treasured by those who take that journey.

FUN FACT:

Chrono Trigger's connections to Chrono Cross were not as direct as many fans wanted. However, additional content in the Nintendo DS port creates more-substantial links, particularly with characters Magus and Schala. These new areas, Lost Sanctum and Dimensional Vortex, are included in the Steam and mobile ports of Chrono Trigger.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Chrono Trigger stands the test of time with iconic graphic design, memorable music composition, and gameplay that surprised genre enthusiasts. The five main minds behind it—Akira Toriyama, Nobou Uematsu, Yuji Horii, Kazuhiko Aoki, and Hironobu Sakaguchi—are indeed a JRPG dream team of creatives surrounded by an extremely talented group of colleagues.

—Alex McCumbers, co-owner of Forever Classic Games (www.foreverclassicgames.com)

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CHAPTER 11

CONTRA

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1988

After getting my Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas in 1987—a surprise present from my big brother!—I spent the next few years playing the bejesus out of the console. I was 20 years old, unmarried, and not tied down by kids or a house payment, and when I wasn't at work, I could play video games pretty much whenever I wanted for as long as I wanted.

And play I did. My console came with *Super Mario Bros.*, and I quickly added a number of other titles to my collection, including *Castlevania*, *Trojan*, *Hogan's Alley*, *Karnov*, *Ikari Warriors*, *Metroid*, *Rygar*, and *The Legend of Zelda*. I loved them all.

Things only got better in 1988. That year saw a bevy of blockbuster titles. *Ninja Gaiden* kicked insane amounts of ass. *Super Mario Bros. 2* was mind-bogglingly epic. *Mega Man 2* remains a series favorite for many gamers. Friends bought me a copy of *Double Dragon* for babysitting their kids and I played it into the ground, forgiving the fact that the main game lacked a two-player co-op mode. And then there was a little game called *Contra*, featuring two muscular dudes and a creature ripped off from H. R. Giger's monster designs in the movie *Alien* (1979) on the cover. I was mesmerized by Bob Wakelin's box art, which has become almost as iconic as the game itself.

I discovered right away that *Contra* was a tough game, with enemies pouncing and bullets flying everywhere, but I was unfazed. It was easier and had far-better controls than another recent acquisition, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, a good but frustrating game that demanded near perfection from the player to beat it (which I never did). *Contra* was difficult, but I played it so much that I actually finished it with the set number of three lives (plus a handful of continues), meaning I didn't use the famous 30-life Konami code (I didn't use it because I didn't even know about it at the time). This is more of a testament to how much I played the game (A HELLUVA LOT) than it is the skills I possessed on the NES (though I was pretty decent at certain titles).

In this tour de force of macho gaming, which takes place deep in the Amazon jungle, where alien warmonger Red Falcon has transformed ancient Mayan ruins into "monuments dedicated to mass destruction," you assume the role of a muscle-bound soldier from the Special Forces elite commando squad. Armed with the ability to run, jump, duck, and fire a gun at aliens and evil soldiers, the guerrilla warrior you control must work his way through eight fast-paced stages of brutal action: Jungle, Base 1, Waterfall, Base 2, Snow Field, Energy Zone, Hangar Zone, and Alien's Lair. Bases 1 and 2 sport a pseudo-3-D, behind-the-soldier perspective, while Waterfall features vertical scrolling.

Capturing flying power-ups enables you to upgrade your firepower to machine gun, laser, fireball, rapid fire, and, most famously, the awesome spread gun. Not only will you face a near-constant supply of bad guys and creatures, you must dodge or destroy (or both) such obstacles as lasers, fire, mortar rounds, gun turrets, metal claws, and heavy-duty machinery. You'll battle an assortment of creatively designed bosses as well. The game looks, sounds, and plays great, but one-hit kills and swarming enemies may intimidate casual players.

Unlike *Double Dragon* for the NES, *Contra* maintained the two-player co-op mode from its coin-op cousin. *Contra* did indeed debut in the arcades (in 1987), but, as with such ColecoVision titles as *Lady Bug*, *Pepper II*,

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and *Venture*, the game found its fan base and true identity at home. While *Contra* was relatively obscure as a coin-op title (prior to the internet, many fans were oblivious to its arcade roots), it is absolutely synonymous with the NES. I certainly prefer the NES port to the original, partly due to nostalgia, but also because it has a better feel to it.

There are a variety of differences between the two versions. The arcade game, which I played at Putt-Putt Golf back in the day, has a vertical/upright monitor (à la *Galaga* or Konami's own *Twinbee*), meaning you can see farther above and below your character at the expense of seeing farther ahead or behind. This makes enemies more difficult to anticipate in the side-scrolling levels, though it works well for the behind-the-character stages. The power-up icons in the arcade game look like weapons, while the NES version uses falcon symbols.

The graphics are more detailed in the coin-op original. For example, one protagonist resembles Arnold Schwarzenegger from *Predator*, while the other favors Sylvester Stallone as Rambo. The NES characters, on the other hand, appear more generic, though they move faster. I prefer the visuals of the NES game, despite its technical limitations. Even though the arcade game uses more color hues, the NES game has a brighter, more vibrant, more pleasingly colorful look. Other differences include boss placement and level structure, such as the last four levels in the coin-op game progressing without a break. The NES game is divided neatly into eight stages, each with a boss and a transitional cutscene.

Despite the fact that NES *Contra* has a two-player mode—one player controls Lance, a.k.a. Scorpion, while the other controls Bill, a.k.a. Mad Dog—I far prefer going it alone. When there's another gamer tagging along they tend to drag me down. Or they might scroll the screen forward while I respawn into a pit. Or they would steal my extra lives after losing all theirs. Some *Contra* fans I know welcome the help, but if I want to play a co-op game on the NES I'll go with any number of other titles, such as *Bubble Bobble*, *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*, or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game*.

The legendary status of *Contra* has only grown over the years (thanks in part to the Konami Code, which it popularized), and it has gone on to become one of the most beloved, most storied games for the system. If there were a Mount Rushmore of NES games, *Contra* would make the cut in my book, right there with *Super Mario Bros.* (or *Super Mario Bros. 3*), *The Legend of Zelda*, and *Metroid*.

A game for the ages, *Contra* spawned numerous sequels over the years, including *Super C* (NES), *Contra III: The Alien Wars* (Game Boy, SNES), *Contra Hard Corps* (Genesis), *Contra: Shattered Soldier* (PlayStation 2), *Contra IV* (Nintendo DS), and too many others to mention.

To paraphrase the most memorable line from the action/sci-fi cult classic *They Live* (1988), "*Contra* is here to chew bubble gum and kick ass, and it's all out of bubble gum."

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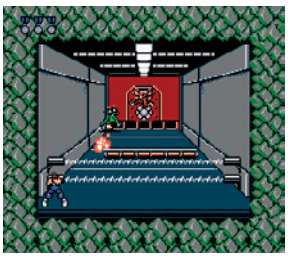
FUN FACT:

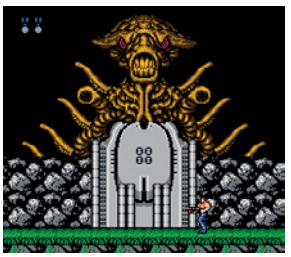
When Konami released the NES version of Contra in the PAL region (Europe and Australia), the company renamed the game Probotector (a portmanteau of "robot" and "protector") and replaced the protagonists and many of the human enemies with robots. This was likely done to circumvent Germany's strict censorship laws prohibiting sales of violent video games to minors.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The August 2001 issue of Game Informer, where Contra ranked #13 in the "Top 100 Games of All Time List," summed up the appeal of the game well: "Two dudes, temporary power-ups, plenty of weapons, and awesome bosses whipped NES owners into a frenzy and became trademarks of the series. It's not that any one aspect of Contra was revolutionary, other than that it all added up to unshakable fun, despite being a difficult game to conquer."

—Brett Weiss





CHAPTER 12

CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

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If the *Rambo*, *Terminator*, and *Alien* movie franchises got together and made a video game baby, it would be the Contra series. Konami's testosterone-infused IP essentially serves as a love letter to Hollywood's biggest action flicks of the '80s. From the plots to the character designs, from the level layouts to the menacing enemies that inhabit them, Contra games rarely fail to draw upon those cinematic inspirations in the most-effective ways.

Contra, the first installment of the series, debuted in arcades in early 1987, a few months after details of the infamous Iran-Contra affair were made public. It remains uncertain as to whether or not the game's name was intentionally derived from the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, but the game's ending theme song was titled "Sandinista," named for the real-life adversaries of the Contras.

Designed by Koji Hiroshita, *Contra* was a fast-paced, seven-stage shoot-'em-up consisting of both traditional left-to-right side-scrolling levels as well as areas featuring a pseudo-3-D view that places the player in a third-person perspective while attacking and moving toward the goal at the "back" of the screen. *Contra* also included one of the series' best features from the get-go: two-player simultaneous cooperative play. The ability for two players to play at the same time exponentially increased the game's fun factor while also making the challenges that much more manageable.

Players would start off with a standard rifle but could eventually uncover better weapons such as a laser gun, flame thrower, or spread gun (ahhhhhhhh, that spread gun!). The game begins in a jungle reminiscent of *Rambo* or *Predator*, later progresses through industrial levels with a certain *Terminator* feel, and finally through alien-infested biological areas conjured from a Cronenberg fever dream. *Contra* was an instant hit. The following year *Contra* was ported to home computers, including the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, and Amstrad CPC, as well as, most famously, the Nintendo Entertainment System.

As *Contra* arrived on the NES, Konami was busy launching its second installment in the Contra series, *Super Contra*, in arcades. Helmed again by Hiroshita, *Super Contra* (later rebranded *Super C* for its NES port) deviated little from the formula that made the original *Contra* such a smash hit. Gamers gravitated to it and fell in love all over again. *Super Contra* felt familiar and played superbly, yet without feeling like a dull rehash of the original. Much like the series' cinematic counterparts, gamers loved each new game, despite having a pretty good idea of what to expect.

Konami had used their ports of *Contra* games to showcase the capabilities of whichever computer or console they graced. At the time, taking an arcade game (especially a well-received one) and tearing it down to play on a technologically less capable machine was oftentimes an exercise in futility. Thankfully Konami was no stranger to the practice, given their track record for porting past arcade titles, including *Frogger* (1981), *Gyruss* (1983), and *Gradius* (1985). But Konami swerved from their tradition of taking a *Contra* game from the arcade to console in 1991 with *Operation C* (albeit very similar to *Super C*) for the Nintendo Game Boy and in 1992 with *Contra III: The Alien Wars*.

Designed specifically for Nintendo's 16-bit SNES machine, *Contra III* was purposely sculpted to get the most out of the system's Mode 7 rendering engine, as well as many other capabilities unavailable on previous platforms. Sprite scaling, parallax scrolling, and other nifty graphical sleights of hand gave rise to some truly impressive visuals and gameplay aspects previously unseen. A prime example is how *Contra III* introduced a pair of overhead view levels where the entire environment could spin clockwise and counterclockwise as the player(s) navigate through. Not only is it visually impressive and unique, it also incorporates a gameplay element previously unexplored by the series.

Contra III takes place in the year 2636, with the evil organization Red Falcon declaring war on Earth's inhabitants. It's up to our heroes, Bill "Mad Dog" Rizer and his partner Lance "Scorpion" Bean, to once again destroy Red Falcon and save Earth. The premise of *Contra III* is similar to previous *Contra* games: players embark on a run-and-gun quest to kill virtually everything in sight with awesome weaponry while somersaulting through platformed environments. But *Contra III* takes this time-tested premise to a new level. Developed by Nobuya Nakazato during only his third year at Konami, *Contra III* would include more enemies, more over-the-top action sequences, and an even more diverse arsenal of weapons. Speaking of weapons, players could now dual-wield weapons! With a little practice you can fire homing missiles *and* the spread gun (ahhhhhhhh, that spread gun!) at the same time!

The level designs may be *Contra III*'s shining attribute, one example being an entire level played while on vehicles reminiscent of *Star Wars*' Speeder bikes. Or the part where you commandeer a one-man tank and roll right over throngs of incoming enemies. Or the boss fight against a giant robot that looks like something straight out of *Terminator*. Or the nail-biting level where our heroes dangle from and jump across a series of flying missiles! The levels sometimes border on near-comedic levels of caffeine-powered surrealism, but the net gain is always one of pure entertainment.

Another excellent aspect of *Contra III* is that Konami finally got the learning curve right. Don't get me wrong—it's still a challenge—but it's at least beatable with practice. Earlier installments in the Contra series were pure mental masochism. That's to be expected, since the first two *Contra* games existed to munch your quarters as quickly as possible while luring you back for repeated punishment. Since *Contra III* was never an arcade game, it played and felt more like a title intended for a home console. And, similar to *Contra* and *Super C* for the NES, *Contra III* incorporated a cheat code that would afford the player more lives to start with.

As with most multiplayer games, teaming up with a friend boosts the fun factor in *Contra III*. The more bullets flyin', the better! While co-op play certainly has its advantages, it also has one distinct drawback: if either player traverses a vertically oriented level too quickly and the other player fails to keep pace, they'll fall off the screen and lose a life. So, yeah, don't be a slacker.

Contra III has almost no shortcomings. To this day it retains some of the loftiest praise of any SNES title by gamers and critics alike. IGN published a retrospective piece claiming *Contra III* is "arguably the best installment in the *Contra* series." Seeing as the SNES was the only platform on which the game could be played at the time, it wormed its way into seemingly every SNES owner's collection, with *USgamer* once stating that *Contra III* is "practically synonymous with SNES ownership." And in 1997 *Electronic Gaming Monthly* listed *Contra III* as the eighth-best console game ever made.

The Contra franchise has since grown to nearly a dozen and a half titles playable on almost every major platform, including consoles, computers, handhelds, and mobile devices. It's to the point now where it's hard to take a gaming platform seriously if it doesn't have a *Contra* title in its library.

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FUN FACT:

Remember how I said, "Contra III was never an arcade game"? Okay, that was technically a lie. Contra III was originally included on the Nintendo Super System in conjunction with its SNES launch. The Nintendo Super System was an arcade machine that was used to emulate specific SNES titles. This machine allowed gamers to try out a game prior to purchasing it. Depositing money furnished the gamer with more play time. So, while it appeared only in an emulated format on a pay-to-play machine, Contra III did kinda sorta have an arcade version.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Contra III has aged remarkably well. This is evidenced in part by the fact that certain newer games resemble titles like Contra III—both in terms of play style and artistic presentation. Blazing Chrome (JoyMasher, 2019) is one of many such examples. It's an obvious homage to Contra III in terms of its story, play style, sound, artistic presentation, etc. So closely does it pay tribute to Konami's series that it could be confused as canon. And like they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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WE HAVE ONE THING TO SAY ABOUT CONTRA® III FOR THE SUPER NES.™
BOOM.
KONAMI

CHAPTER 13

CRASH BANDICOOT

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: 3-D PLATFORMER / SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: NAUGHTY DOG
1 PLAYER
1996

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It's Christmas morning 1996. My dad is at the bottom of the stairs with a ridiculous hulk of a camcorder balanced on his shoulder. My four-year-old brother is grinning like a maniac because that's what tiny children do on camera. I am 10, and blissfully unaware that I'm about to lose my position for gaming in front of the television forever.

I had begged and borrowed NES playtime at the homes of relatives and friends before getting my own Sega Genesis system and sitting much too close to the screen for hours on end at home. My little brother, Max, was my biggest supporter. He would cheer at my victories, commiserate my losses, and fetch me snacks from the kitchen on command. He was a solid Player 2 when I needed some help in trickier games, especially for such a little kid, but I was in control of the console. Until one word changed everything.

"Rutabaga!"

It was like *Crash Bandicoot* was designed specifically for my brother. Max tore off the wrapping paper to reveal a strange new game package with bright colors and cartoonish graphics. His eyes grew wide as he instantly connected with the orange fox. It was like a buff Cheeto version of Sonic with similar spiky hair, but way-cooler gloves and shoes. (Note: Crash is, in fact, a mutated eastern barred bandicoot, which is a marsupial.)

We opened up the new PlayStation system and popped in *Crash Bandicoot* for the first time. Max was glued to the screen with controller in hand before I had a chance to browse the game insert. The start-up sounded a bit like *Rugrats*; catchy and upbeat. The graphics seemed much smoother and more three-dimensional than anything I'd ever seen on Sega. The opening with Doctor Neo Cortex was reminiscent of the television show *Reboot* in terms of animation, which at the time was mind blowing.

The small silhouette of my brother contrasted by the bright, smooth landscape of N. Sanity Beach on Christmas Day is how I recall the moment control of the controllers shifted. That was the day Max rose to Player 1 status and I was demoted to Player 2 on a game that didn't even have a multiplayer option.

For being a preschooler, he *owned* that game. The ease of the introductory level made him a fast master of the controls. Spin, jump, break stuff. Checkpoints meant he wasn't doomed to restart the entire level like so many of the harsh challenges I cut my gaming teeth on. Plus he had a floating mask to help him out. I'm very familiar with the sound of Crash dying and being resurrected by Aku Aku, because that was also the sound of Max learning. His expressions of frustration were as close as a child could get to cursing without being grounded.

Okay, so Aku Aku doesn't actually say "rutabaga."

According to Andy Gavin and Jason Rubin, creators of *Crash Bandicoot* and founders of Naughty Dog game development studio, the mask possessed by the spirit of a witch doctor actually says "ooga booga" or "uga

buga," depending on your preferred phonetic spelling. As @asgavin confirmed on Twitter many (many) times, it's just nonsense and doesn't mean anything.

Except it actually seems to mean something to the people around the globe who have invested more than 40 million game purchases in the Crash franchise for a quarter of a century. For '90s kids especially, Crash is a symbol of their childhood. He encapsulates everything wholesome and strange about that magical decade, perhaps because he was—in a very real way—a pioneer of that era.

Nintendo had Mario, Sega had Sonic, and PlayStation had Polygon Man—yes, he was as marketable as he sounds. It was obvious the new age of video games needed a new face. Naughty Dog, which is such a '90s name for a video game company, stepped up to the challenge.

According to Rubin (via Gavin's blog, all-things-andy-gavin.com), "The concept of making a mascot game for the PlayStation was easy. The odds of succeeding were next to nil. Remember, we were two 24-year-olds whose biggest title to date had not reached 100,000 units sold! But if there was something we never lacked, it was confidence."

That confidence paid off. Big time.

When Bandicoot crashed the console, he brought with him a new energy that broadened the sales of Sony PlayStation to a much-wider audience. Gavin and Rubin are surprisingly humble about their critical role in the birth of the game, which not only spawned more than 20 sequels and spin-offs but also paved the way for a new style of home console gameplay. *Crash* would be breaking new ground and posed all-new development challenges.

"We called it the 'Sonic's Ass' game," Gavin shared on his blog. "And it was born from the question: 'What would a 3D CAG be like?' Well, we thought, you'd spend a lot of time looking at 'Sonic's Ass.' Aside from the difficulties of identifying with a character only viewed in posterior, it seemed cool. But we worried about the camera, dizziness, and the player's ability to judge depth. This was something that had never been tried before."

Gavin and Rubin found a creative solution to most of these issues, though players of the game might argue there was still room for improvement. Crash greets gamers facing the screen so they can be properly introduced before he turns his back on them to run into the jungle. There's also the inclusion of 2-D levels, which would be more familiar to classic gamers.

"And third, we would attempt the reverse of a Sonic ass level—the run INTO the screen—which became the legendary boulder levels," Rubin explained.

While some players may still have difficulty judging precisely where to jump and will no doubt argue there

was a learning curve to the camera angles, reviews of the gameplay are significantly positive. It may be little more than *Sonic* from a different perspective to the harsher critics, but everyone agreed that Naughty Dog succeeded in their creation of a game that combined beautiful graphics, enjoyable gameplay, and a badass new character.

The impressive visuals of *Crash Bandicoot* were accompanied by an undeniably '90s sound. Josh Mancell churned out the iconic soundtrack for *Crash Bandicoot* while working with Mutato Muzika, founded by Mark and Bob Mothersbaugh and a number of other Devo musicians. Their sound evokes sweet memories of Nicktoons, Dunkaroos, and Skechers. It also helps propel you through the 32 levels of adventure as Crash battles evil to save Tawna and defeat Doctor Neo Cortex.

Crash ushered in a new era of gaming and a new generation of gamers. The team at Naughty Dog broke programming rules (adding more polygons to graphics than thought possible), crammed more challenges than ever before into one game (exceeding the 70,000 CD hit limit of PlayStation processing), and worked tirelessly to make sure the end result would deliver a whole lot

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of one important word to customers. *Not* rutabaga, but the f-word—FUN.

For my little brother, it also offered a lot of the other f-word: frustration. Thanks, *Crash*, for making sure Max's early rise to Player 1 status still offered plenty of opportunity for me to be his Aku Aku, steering him around pitfalls until he was skilled enough to outrun the boulders on his own.

FUN FACT:

Andy Gavin and Jason Rubin not only gave us the gift of Crash Bandicoot but also documented their experience in a very detailed "Making of" blog. Google it for more behind-the-scenes concept sketches and stories!

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Following in the footsteps of video game icons such as Mario and Sonic, Crash Bandicoot is one of the most recognizable characters and franchises in gaming history. And his debut game totally rocks!

—Krystle Tiedeman, librarian and producer of The King of Arcades

CHAPTER 14

DEVIL'S CRUSH

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: PINBALL
PUBLISHER: NEC
DEVELOPER: COMPILE
1 PLAYER
1990

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By the fourth generation of consoles, pinball video games had come a long way from the crude beginnings of unimaginatively titled games such as *Video Pinball* for the Atari VCS and *Pinball* on the NES. As technology advanced, the need to develop new, creative pinball video games increased. Compile had the notion that there was still a lot of life left in the genre. They developed a game that combined the elements of a sci-fi action title with good old-fashioned bumper and flipper pinball tables that had been around for decades. The end result was *Alien Crush*, released for the PC-Engine/Turbografx-16 in the late '80s. The game was well regarded and enticed Compile to create a sequel. Instead of sticking with the alien and science-fiction theme, they took a darker, more sinister turn for the follow-up.

The second installment of what would become the Crush Pinball series, *Devil's Crush* is a scrolling, three-screen pinball game with a medieval occult theme complete with skeletons, demons, and what I would consider an interesting interpretation of the devil. You battle these evil forces and a creepy-looking human female face that slowly turns into a green dragon devil's face as the game progresses. The overall theme of the game maintains an eerie vibe to go along with the relentless gameplay.

Barrages of beasts, skulls, and wizard enemies come at you while you try to rack up a high score. Each of the three vertically scrolling screens contains its own set of left and right flippers to keep the ball in play. If your ball drains through the lowest screen's flippers, you lose a turn. Just when you think you've seen all there is to see on the three screens, you discover there are numerous sublevels within the boards, providing an additional challenge in the form of minigames and boss battles. These sublevels are where you can really rack up points, especially if you're successful at accomplishing whatever the specific task is. For example, defeat a five-headed dragon in one minigame or several skeleton knights in another. It's in these sublevels where the game stays fresh and exciting. There's even a password feature that allows you to save your high scores.

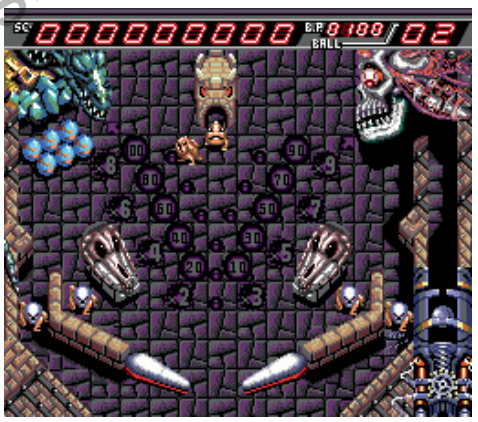
The soundtrack to this gnarly occult-themed pinball title is at once creepy, upbeat, catchy, and perfect for a fast-paced pinball simulator. The game's composer, Toshiaki Sakoda, worked for Compile in the late '80s and early '90s, with various memorable game compositions to his credit, including *Alien Crush*, *MUSHA*, and *GG Aleste*. A good pinball game is often known for its music and sound effects, and *Devil's Crush* doesn't disappoint.

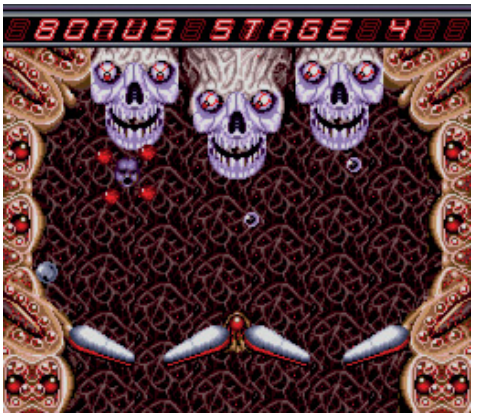
I have an enormous affinity for the solid-state pinball machines of the '80s and '90s. As the former owner of two pinball machines myself, I've always had an interest in re-creating pinball games' feel and fun without having to keep a collection of large and expensive pins in my home. Owning actual pinball games is extraordinarily satisfying, but they take up significant space, plus a working knowledge of circuits and microprocessors to keep them in tip-top shape. For these reasons each new video pinball game piques my interest.

However, *Devil's Crush* eluded me for many years after its release. That is largely attributed to its initial exclusivity for a video game console that I did not own when it came out. When the port found its way to the Sega Genesis, I was engrossed in such titles as *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Mortal Kombat*. I happily picked up a copy of *Devil's Crush* when I finally began collecting for the TurboGrafx-16 in the first few years of the 2000s.

In 2014 the Video Game Critic (videogamecritic.com) wrote, "The game appeared on the Genesis as *Dragon's Fury*, but I would argue this version is slightly more playable. The wider table makes it easier to appreciate the detail of the mysterious creatures and medieval contraptions. *Devil's Crush* may just be the most addictive game I've played on the TurboGrafx. I could play this one for hours on end."

Speaking of *Dragon's Fury*, the Genesis game differs from the more colorful *Devil's Crush* in several ways. In *Dragon's Fury*, an Options Mode lets you modify ball speed and tilt options and customize the controls, and there are more bonus rooms and more musical tracks. Hidden areas are different, and a seventh hidden stage appears if you finish the other six hidden stages.





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Lucas M. Thomas wrote a largely favorable review of *Devil's Crush* for IGN.com in 2007, but he did mention that the gameplay could get repetitive: "The only thing holding back *Devil's Crush* is its lack of variety, in that there is only the one table to experience. It's bigger and more interactive than the single table seen in *Alien Crush*, which is good, but it would have helped this title's replay value quite a bit to have even just one other, differently laid out surface to play on. There are only so many times you can attack the same circle of shuffling sorcerers before you find yourself ready for something new to happen."

Regardless, *Devil's Crush* is one of the best games for the underrated TurboGrafx-16.

FUN FACT:

In the North American versions of the game, including both the original TurboGrafx-16 rendition and the Sega Genesis port, programmers removed hexagrams and replaced them with generic stars.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Devil's Crush gets just about everything right, from the feel of the flippers and pinball physics to the fascinating themes, unnerving enemies, and creatively appealing playfields. The subscreens are worth seeking out and experiencing while also providing enough challenge to prevent them from being mastered on first attempts. Overall it is easy to pick up and hard to put down, always the mark of a great game.

—Jason Breininger, retro-gaming writer and music podcaster

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CHAPTER 15

DIDDY KONG RACING

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: GO-KART RACING
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RARE
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1997

Hindsight being as it is, when choosing between Sony's PlayStation, Sega's Saturn, and the Nintendo 64, my first console of that generation probably should NOT have been Nintendo's first truly 3-D-capable machine. Having jumped from the NES to the Game Boy to the Super Nintendo, I blindly jumped into the N64 ecosystem without performing due diligence.

With its four controller ports on the front of the console, a big selling feature of the Nintendo 64's library was multiplayer titles such as *Super Smash Bros.*, *GoldenEye 007*, and *Mario Kart 64*. While there were some classic single-player exclusives like Nintendo's own Mario and Zelda franchises, playing with friends was the highlight of the N64 experience. Unfortunately I wasn't exactly teeming with friends in 1997.

When I got a Nintendo 64 that year, *Mario Kart 64* was good for a nightly rental or two, but there wasn't enough to do on my own to ever consider purchasing it at its steep $79.99 price tag. When he would indulge me, my brother would play a circuit or two, but mostly I was just racing the same few cups by myself, and while it was enjoyable enough, it couldn't compete with playing with one, two, or even three people.

Upon *Diddy Kong Racing*'s release in late 1997, I rented it, but it didn't click with me right away. "This is too kiddy," I thought, as I envied PlayStation owners getting the likes of *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*. Early in 1998, though, I tried the game again and suddenly found myself unable to put it down, so much so that I brokered a 50/50 cost split with my parents to get my own copy as an Easter present of sorts.

Diddy Kong Racing, like a lot of games by Rare and Nintendo for the Nintendo 64, can be picked up and enjoyed by just about anyone, yet it also feels like it was designed just for me. It combines the easy-to-learn controls of *Mario Kart 64* with the collection and exploration from *Super Mario 64*, making it both fun to play on your own *and* with friends. All these years later there's still nothing quite like it.

According to the story line, the island home of Timber the Tiger is renowned for its racetracks. When the evil space being known as the Wizpig arrives and declares himself ruler over all of Timber's courses, it's up to Diddy Kong, as well as future Rare stars Banjo and Conker, to determine who among them is the best racer. Only then can they hope to challenge Wizpig and send him back to where he came from. You don't play *Diddy Kong* for its deep narrative, but what's present is enough to hinge its best mode around.

One of the obvious differences between *Diddy Kong Racing* and *Mario Kart 64* is that here you race not only go-karts, but also planes and hovercraft. There are specific courses made for each, but the tracks are designed in such a way that they can also be played with multiple vehicles. The biggest hook in *Diddy Kong Racing* is its highly enjoyable Adventure mode.

As with other kart racers, *Diddy Kong Racing* tasks you with winning first place in a number of themed circuits. The first, Dino Domain, is ripe with fossils, volcanoes, and even prehistoric creatures that will cross the road as you're driving. It's joined by the tropical Sherbet Island, the frosty Snowflake Mountain, and the medieval land of Dragon Forest.

You don't select these courses from a simple menu. Rather, you must seek them out in a small hub world that you can explore with all of your vehicles. Taking

first place awards you with a Gold Balloon—essentially this game's version of *Super Mario 64*'s power stars—and similar to that game, later worlds and courses are locked until you gather enough.

Things get more interesting when you manage to win all of the races in a world, since it's after that point when *Diddy Kong Racing*'s terrific boss battles and Silver Coin challenges open up. Bosses, such as a charging

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triceratops and a creepy octopus, are one-on-one battles that test your skills with the game's skidding mechanic and weapons system.

As in *Mario Kart 64*, you can pick up items—found in balloons in this case—that give you power-ups such as missiles, shields, and an added burst of speed. There's a risk/reward to the system here, since you can stack weapons to make more-powerful ones. Do you hold on to that missile in hopes of giving it homing capacity, or do you swap it out for a defensive shield against an opponent with an itchy trigger finger?

When you beat a boss, Silver Coin challenges become unlocked, and they're easily one of the best parts of *Diddy Kong Racing*. Not only do you have to complete the races you've done *and* take the gold once more, but you must do so while picking up eight coins. Some are in plain sight, while others will cause you to venture away from helpful shortcuts to get them all. Once all of these challenges are completed, you're placed in an even more challenging rematch with a boss to complete a world.

On top of *all* of that, each world houses a hidden key that unlocks battle minigames where you're given objectives such as being the last man (animal?) standing, or gathering specific items and keeping them safe in your home base. These, along with all the courses, can be played with up to four friends, and when combined with genre staples such as time trials, hidden characters, and worlds, there's a lot here to keep you occupied.

Upon release *Diddy Kong Racing* was met with stellar reviews. In his 9.0/10 review from *Electronic Gaming Monthly* #101 (December 1997), Crispin Boyer wrote, "The courses—of which there are more than 25—are filled with side roads and power-up-rich niches. Plus, you get Boss levels, multiple tasks to accomplish on each track, four-player racing and Battle Modes—there's just too much cool stuff in *Diddy Kong Racing*." These sentiments were echoed by fellow reviewer Dan "Shoe" Hsu, who stated in his 8.5/10 review, "This game beats *Mario Kart 64* in every department . . . could've rated higher, had *Mario Kart 64* not stolen most of its thunder."

More than two decades past its release, *Diddy Kong Racing* still receives high praise from YouTube channels such as N64 Glenn Plant. In his review published in August 2018, he said, "As an overall package, the game is beautiful, with dry colors and smooth textures that Rare is known for, and the impeccable character design make this amazing to look at. . . . Add to this my favorite N64 soundtrack composed by David Wise, which is just jammed with the charm and creativity that you would be expecting."

What's astonishing about *Diddy Kong Racing* is that it was turned around relatively quickly. Originally Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie* was slated to arrive in the Christmas 1997 season, but it was delayed until 1998. In "A Month of Kong: The Making of Diddy Kong Racing," found on nintendolife.com, Rare's Lee Musgrave stated, "The team behind *Banjo-Kazooie* had loads of stuff in the game, but they thought they could really push it towards being a *Super Mario 64* killer. . . . So they wanted to do more on it, which meant that they were going to miss the Christmas slot."

Diddy Kong Racing humbly began life as a prototype for *Pro-Am 64*, an update of a game Rare made for the NES until the decision was made to alter it into a traditional character-centric kart racer. "I don't know how the politics of it worked, but the decision was made that rebranding the game to *Diddy Kong Racing* would work better, especially as a Christmas AAA release," Musgrave said. As to why Diddy was chosen over the King of Kong himself, Musgrave revealed the decision was theirs to make: "Nintendo enjoyed the fact that we chose Diddy Kong over Donkey Kong; I think that it was us trying to build on the fact that Diddy was ours and DK was theirs."

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FUN FACT:

Before he was turned into the foul-mouthed, beer-swilling character seen in Conker's Bad Fur Day, the sassy squirrel was set to star in a more family-friendly platformer titled Twelve Tales: Conker 64. This explains why the Conker seen here is so different from what players would see more than three years later.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

There have been no shortage of kart racers released since the holiday 1997 season, but none offer the innovate single-player Adventure mode found in Diddy Kong Racing. It's one of many classics released by Rare on the Nintendo 64 that desperately needs a sequel or rerelease.

—Blair Farrell, owner and content generator for Comic Gamers Assemble, author of The Avengers in Video Games: A Guide to Solo Adventures and Mighty Marvel Team-Ups, with Creator Interviews

CHAPTER 16

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RARE
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

When *Donkey Kong Country* released late in 1994, I was working at Waldenbooks in the local mall, which also had a KB Toys where I bought many of my video games. *Donkey Kong* for the Game Boy had come out earlier that year, and I was glad to see one of my favorite franchises return to the fore. Unlike Game Boy *Donkey Kong*, which expanded on the 1981 coin-op classic with puzzles and tons of new levels, *Donkey Kong Country* took a complete left turn. Instead of a simple climbing game, *DKC* offers the type of expansive, side-scrolling, secret-filled, hop-and-bop gameplay pioneered by the Super Mario Bros. series, with level design influenced by *Super Mario Bros. 3* in particular.

I didn't purchase *DKC* right away—I waited a few months until a sale temporarily dropped the price from $59.99 to $38 and some change. Because that's how I roll, always looking for a bargain. The wait was certainly well worth it (actually, I should have bought the game the moment it came out—it was certainly worth the full retail price), since I found the graphics amazing, the music atmospheric, and the gameplay style familiar and fun. Better yet, it was the perfect two-player experience for my wife and me after we had to stop playing *Super Street Fighter II: Turbo* due to some heated battles. *Street Fighter* divided us but *DKC* is cooperative, and we had a blast over many hours working together to complete the game.

To create this excellent platformer, Rare bought Silicon Graphics workstations for rendering 3-D models. The developers—more than a dozen programmers working on the game for 18 months—converted the 3-D models into sprites, resulting in gorgeous graphics, especially for a 16-bit console. In fact, when the game was being demoed in stores across the country, many people wrongly assumed it was running on the "Project Reality" or "Ultra 64" machine, which ultimately became the Nintendo 64, the more powerful follow-up to the SNES. The characters look fantastic, as do the prerendered backgrounds. The game is a visual tour de force, and it helped keep the console relevant for a while longer, as many gamers looked ahead to the forthcoming Sony PlayStation, which would hit the US the next year. It also helped Nintendo in their Console War against the Sega Genesis.

The first *Donkey Kong* game neither produced nor directed by creator Shigeru Miyamoto (though he did contribute design ideas), *Donkey Kong Country* didn't reinvent the wheel in terms of gameplay—it's platforming 101—but it is a delightful experience from beginning to end. Gamers guide Donkey Kong—a new character who is the original Donkey Kong's grandson—through more than 100 secret-filled levels of running, bouncing, jumping (on enemies and over obstacles), climbing, swimming, swinging (on vines), banana-collecting action. For every 100 bananas you collect, you get an extra life. Bananas can also point you in the direction of hidden items, secret areas, and the end of the level.

A defining, highly enjoyable aspect of the game is that you can alternate play control from Donkey Kong to his cart-wheeling nephew Diddy, who follows along as Donkey does his thing. In Two Player Team mode, when you want to turn control of the game over to the other player/character, simply press the select button. Control also switches to the other player/character when you die, so, if you are in this two-player

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mode, your gaming partner needs to be ready to take over at a moment's notice.

One strategy is to switch control to the stronger player during difficult areas, which is what my wife and I would do. I typically tackled the harder levels and the bosses while she enjoyed revisiting early levels to collect bananas and balloons for extra lives (to travel to an earlier level, you hitch a ride with Funky Kong, who operates a flight service). This tag-team gameplay mechanic is helpful in beating the level, since Donkey or Diddy can absorb only one hit before they vanish into a barrel located somewhere within the stage. When only one protagonist is on screen, you will run across barrels containing the other character, and you can free them up to tag along with you. In Two Player Contest mode, you alternate with another player to see who can finish the most levels in the shortest time.

Both Donkey, whose specialty is a barrel roll, and Diddy, whose signature move is a cartwheel attack, can jump on the reptilian Kremling enemies inhabiting the game, as well as pick up and throw barrels at them. Donkey, who is slower than the speedy Diddy but can't jump as high or as far, can also do a hand slap attack to defeat enemies and reveal hidden underground items. Kremlings who, according to the game's simple story line, ripped off Donkey Kong's banana horde appear in many forms, including beasts resembling buzzards (Necky), armadillos (Army), snakes (Slippa),and large, muscular creatures with fangs (Kritter, Krusha, Klump, Rock Kroc, and Klump).

At various points in the levels, you can hitch a ride on animal friends, which is an absolute blast. Rambi the Rhino breaks into secret doors, Expresso the Ostrich runs fast and makes long leaps, Enguarde the Swordfish swims fast and stabs enemies (while most of the action in the game takes place on land, there are underwater levels à la *Super Mario Bros.*), and Winky the Frog jumps high and has a powerful attack. You will also ride these animals during certain bonus rounds, where you run (or swim) around grabbing items.

Squawks the Parrot is another animal friend you'll encounter. You can't ride him, but he will use a flashlight to light your way through dark caves. Worlds to explore in this game, which are filled with such hazards as burning oil drums, icy platforms, and rickety scaffolding, include Jungle, Factory, Underwater (featuring jellyfish, octopi, piranhas, and sharks as enemies), Mountains (beware of blinding blizzards), Treetops, Caves, Mines (where the apes ride mine carts), and Ruins.

Throughout the game you will encounter Cranky Kong, who is actually the original Donkey Kong from Nintendo's 1981 arcade classic. He's cranky because he's old and doesn't like "the newfangled graphics, sound, and multiple button controllers of today's Nintendo mega-hits." He'll spew useless chatter, but he also offers the occasional strategic hint. Candy Kong, who hopes to marry the younger Donkey Kong, also appears frequently, acting as a save point—simply jump into her barrel to save your progress. Speaking of barrels, they are a frequent theme in the game, and you will get shot out of them to reach certain areas.

Donkey Kong Country, which was ported to the Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance, is such a charming, colorful, and easy-to-control game that it's hard to imagine anyone not liking it, unless you just can't stand

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platformers. The game spawned two Super Nintendo sequels: *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest*, where Diddy Kong and his girlfriend Dixie Kong must rescue Donkey Kong from K. Rool and the Kremlings, and *Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble!*, where Dixie and her new teammate Kiddy Kong must save Donkey and Diddy from the mysterious new leader of the Kremlings. Both offer excellent platforming action, but I prefer *Donkey Kong Country 2*. In fact, you could make a good argument that *DKC*'s first sequel should hold this slot in the book instead of the original game. Regardless, you should play all three games.

More *Donkey Kong Country* sequels followed, including two I've spent a lot of time with: *Donkey Kong Country Returns* for the Wii and *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* for the Wii U and Switch.

FUN FACT:

Donkey Kong Country was the only video game listed in Time magazine's top-ten "Best Products" of 1994.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

More than just about any other platformer, Donkey Kong Country elicits smiles on players' faces. It is hard not to be drawn in by the simple gameplay, the immersive sound effects and music, and the gorgeous graphics, which hold up remarkably well today.

—Brett Weiss

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CHAPTER 17

DOOM

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: WILLIAMS ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: WILLIAMS ENTERTAINMENT
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1995

The video game landscape changed forever in 1993 with the release of id Software's *DOOM*. Hyperbolic? Maybe, but it's also true. Sure, *Wolfenstein 3D* came first chronologically, but if that game created the first-person shooter genre, then it was id Software's smash hit *DOOM* that cemented it as an industry mainstay. *DOOM* made its glorious debut on the PC, and many gamers likely still view it as strictly a computer title. To me, I'll always remember it as a game that bridged the platform divide. That might have something to do with the fact that, at the time, I had zero access to a PC. So my own experience with playing what would become one of my favorite games of all time was probably a little different than most.

The long and the short of it is that I was mostly oblivious to *DOOM* at launch. Though I loved what I had managed to see of it here and there, I simply had no way to play it. And when that time arrived, it was far from the comfort of my own room. I first played *DOOM* at an Electronics Boutique in New York City's Rockefeller Center. Or actually under it, since the subterranean New York City store had *DOOM* running on a PC situated in its computer game section.

In the maybe 15 minutes I played it, I was hooked on the title's bloody action and innovative first-person perspective. Even now, I vividly remember collecting a line of health potions and watching the screen get that now-familiar blue hue. As for when I finally got to play through the game, it wasn't until about a year later at Christmas. That was when the game arrived on the Atari Jaguar. And although that edition was different from the PC original, trimming some levels and altering a few assets, I ripped through it over and over again. I thought it couldn't possibly get any better on any other platform. But oh my, how I was wrong. That's because the PlayStation version followed in 1995.

I got said PS1 version at launch and gobbled it up during Thanksgiving—it was quite the holiday banquet. Improving on all previous console versions of *DOOM*, and beating the contemporaneously released Super Nintendo version to death with a broomstick, the PS1 port upped the ante in a few key ways, and it remains the best version of the game to see release on any classic console. The game excelled across the board, playing, sounding, and looking like a true gem, and it's easily stood the test of time.

DOOM on the PS1 had an interesting pedigree, since it was built on the bones of the aforementioned Jaguar version. As such, it shared that edition's deviations from the PC original. But there was much more to this particular incarnation, in that it also added in parts of *Ultimate DOOM* and *DOOM II*. On top of that, it featured some exclusive maps, and it was visually tailored to Sony's console in some interesting ways and would make anyone who played any other version of it take notice. The familiar corridors and rooms of *DOOM* and *DOOM II* had been infused with brilliant new sectored lighting effects that splashed color everywhere. Simultaneously, the game was overall more shadowy and had a more forbidding feel to it than the Jag edition. The changes made it feel much different.

Still, at its core *DOOM* is *DOOM*. You play as a lone marine who finds himself trapped in the Union Aerospace Corporation's Martian facility. The reckless UAC has ripped open a portal to hell, bringing a flesh-and-blood horde of demons into our universe. With everyone else in the base wiped out or transformed into a zombie, it's up to the unnamed *DOOM* marine to take the battle to the demons. He must blast his way across Mars' moons, Deimos and Phobos, and even across the shores of hell itself, all in an effort to close the rift and end the infestation.

Along the way he'll meet (and blow away) hideous creatures such as the Imp, the Pinky Demon, and the Baron of Hell. All of these beasts look terrific on the PS1, and the now-iconic designs are packed with imagination, particularly the ones fusing technology with demonic flesh. As with everything else in *DOOM*, though, those designs are simple, and that's a big part of why they endure. It should be noted that the PS1 port has slightly fewer enemies but still features an almost complete bestiary. Only the animation-heavy Arch Vile was clipped from the main roster.

If you haven't played *DOOM* and are wondering why I didn't go any deeper into the story, it's because that's pretty much it. Unlike *DOOM 3* and 2016's *DOOM* reboot, which have expansive story lines (relatively speaking), that's all there is to it. *DOOM* doesn't pretend to have even a marginally deep story. Hell, there isn't so much as a single log entry to read to build out the narrative. If you didn't know the "story," then you could easily just assume there isn't one.

But that was never a bad thing. I love the modern *DOOM* series to death. It has a cool tale to tell, with a surprisingly deep amount of lore. Believe me, I'm all about that. As with so many modern video games, however, I can't see myself going back and playing the more recent iterations again and again in the decades to come. I have no such problem with any of the original *DOOM* titles, and the PlayStation *DOOM* is right there with the best of them. The game is ridiculously playable, in either quick bursts or in marathon sessions, thanks to its glut of maps. The only downsides of it are that your playthroughs can't be saved except between missions, and that the only way to play multiplayer is via system link, which is hardly convenient.

Critical reception of the game upon release was exactly what you'd expect—mostly excellent.

The December 1995 issue of *GamePro* magazine scored PS1 *DOOM* as perfect across all four of its categories, mentioning that it was loaded up with enough new content "to surprise even the most battle-weary *DOOM* player." The mag would later award the title with its "Best PlayStation Game" of the year (for '95).

Next Generation magazine reviewed *DOOM* in its March 1996 issue, scoring it favorably with four stars (out of five). In the review, the critic stated that the port put "previous efforts for 32X, Jaguar, and especially Super NES to shame." Can't argue with that one. As an interesting aside, *Next Generation* actually changed the review's overall score later on, adding that fifth star.

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One of the toughest outlets on the game, though, was IGN. The website took *DOOM* on almost a year after release, in November 1996, and gave the port a 7 out of 10. Even so, the review wasn't exactly negative. IGN noted that it was a terrific edition, saying it was "the best conversion yet," and that "the high framerate, impressive light-sourcing effects, and responsive controls make this second to none." The review went on to tout the inclusion of both a "complete port of *DOOM II*" and "a new version of the original *DOOM*, *Ultimate DOOM*."

As a final point of interest, *DOOM*'s own John Romero actually has a blurb on the back of the PlayStation game's packaging, quoting him as saying that it's the "best *DOOM* yet." Romero would go on to later walk that statement back, though, relating to a moderator at Doomworld that it was actually the PC version that he liked best. The reason? That classic keyboard and mouse control scheme, of course.

Regardless, this is an amazing console game that any first-person shooter fan should play.

FUN FACT:

DOOM II's Super Shotgun makes an appearance in the PlayStation's Ultimate DOOM campaign, close to the end. You can add it right from the start, though, via a cheat.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

A port of one of the greatest games of all time that added much more than it cut from its source material, DOOM on the PlayStation has the high honor of being the best version of the game to make it onto any classic console.

—Jason Micciche, writer and editor in chief at BrutalGamer.com

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CHAPTER 18

DUCKTALES

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1989

Race cars, lasers, aeroplanes . . . After more than 30 years it might truly seem a bit of a duck blur, but if you were a kid during the late '80s and early '90s, you were probably watching Disney cartoons after school every day just like I was. Originally debuting in prime time on the Disney Channel, *DuckTales* was the linchpin for Disney's animated television productions, its success eventually leading to multiple spin-off series such as *Darkwing Duck* and *TaleSpin*. It was no surprise that Disney decided to jump on the merchandising bandwagon and license *DuckTales* into a video game format, but just how well mainstay Japanese developer Capcom was able to pull the job off for Disney would prove a greater success than anyone could've predicted at the time.

I loved the *DuckTales* cartoon as a kid. Sure, 90 percent of the character designs were visual permutations of Donald Duck, but the adventures the characters went on were always memorable and emotionally charged, and the theme song is likely burned into my brain forever. At the same time, though, I remember being disappointed by the NES game the first time I saw it, because you played as Scrooge. If anything, I wanted to play as Gizmoduck or Scrooge's nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie, not as some bourgeois, wealth-mongering, Charles Dickens–derived geriatric with a cane and top hat. It didn't make any sense to me conceptually.

Admittedly, I completely dismissed the game for a long time, giving it only a passing acknowledgment during the NES era. Many years later, though, as I became a much more educated artist and developer, the game finally clicked with me in much the same way I fell in love with the graphic minimalism of Piet Mondrian in graduate school. Having a more in-depth understanding of game development and the NES hardware itself, I realized there were technical limitations that Capcom had to deal with alongside production resources and schedules, and that Capcom had fully embraced those constraints and ran with them in a fit of creative genius. I guess some things really do get better with age.

Originally released in North America in September 1989, *DuckTales* is a fairly straightforward 2-D platformer with some nonlinear gameplay elements and was technically the first licensed game ever *developed* by Capcom, having previously been only the *publisher* for various licensed properties. The game is more or less a conversion of *Mega Man 2*, with several of the *Mega Man* games' team members working on the game, with Keiji Inafune contributing to the fantastic sprite art, and Yoshihiro Sakaguchi composing the game's legendary soundtrack (I dare you *not* to sing aloud at the title screen!).

While an NES game featuring Huey, Dewey, and Louie all as playable characters was technologically feasible on Nintendo's 8-bit hardware, actually designing a properly balanced and fleshed-out game with multiple unique playable characters from the ground up would have been prohibitively time consuming and costly. That said, if you're going to make a single-player *DuckTales* game with only one playable character, Scrooge really is the best choice with the fewest potential creative conflicts of interest (i.e., changes for the sake of gameplay that could potentially contradict the source material), and the game's premise is expertly crafted around this.

Playing as Scrooge McDuck, gamers must recover stolen treasures scattered around the globe and defeat

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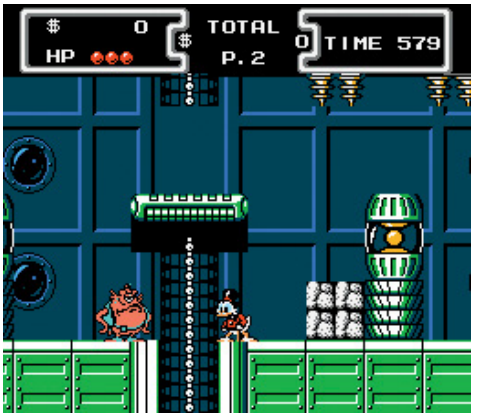
Scrooge's arch rival Flintheart Glomgold to reaffirm his status as the richest duck in the world. Along the way, Scrooge encounters familiar faces from the cartoon series, friends and foes alike. The Beagle Boys, Magicka De Spell, Gizmoduck, Gyro, Huey, Dewey, Louie, Webby, and even Mrs. Beakley and Scrooge's butler, Duckworth, all make appearances with varying degrees of interaction, though most appear simply as stationary NPCs, with only small bits of dialogue informing Scrooge of his next objective. In his usual role as Mr. McDuck's crash-prone pilot, Launchpad McQuack flies Scrooge through special sections of certain levels and transports him back to Duckberg when needed. Seemingly inspired by *Super Mario Bros.*, these return flights play out as autoscrolling bonus levels that have Scrooge scrambling to collect treasure in the clouds.

DuckTales' play control is tight and responsive, but unlike *Mega Man* games, Scrooge doesn't use projectile weapons, instead wielding his trademark cane in a variety of ways to overcome obstacles. While standing he can swing his cane like a club to hit enemies or knock objects out of his way, or even into enemies to defeat them. While he's jumping, his cane acts as a pogo stick that allows him to bounce on enemies and over environmental hazards, greatly enhancing his normal jumping ability. The levels definitely show their *Mega Man* pedigree, but they do a good job of integrating Scrooge's unique play control mechanics into their layouts, rewarding creative players with branching paths or secret areas to explore once they've mastered Scrooge's abilities.

The levels include a romp through the Amazon rainforest, infested with snakes and vines, an expedition deep into an African diamond mine complete with cart rides and vampire bats, chasing down a yeti in the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas, foiling an alien invasion on the moon, and even a showdown with Dracula Duck in Transylvania (no relation to the very non-Disney *Danger Mouse* spin-off *Count Duckula*). Players can choose to play the five levels in any order they like initially, though they are eventually required to revisit certain areas to collect special items to complete the game, a classic design technique that exaggerates the actual amount of content in the game. *DuckTales* does feel a little short on content compared to the *Mega Man* games it was built on top of, but having the game's core design focused on earning money (i.e., points) and collecting treasure rather than combat and exploration not only makes sense for the *DuckTales* IP but also gives it much more of an *arcade* feel with excellent replay value, alleviating concerns about its overall length.



With roughly 1.67 million copies sold in its original run, *DuckTales* was Capcom's bestselling game on the NES and is still looked upon with great fondness by multiple generations of gamers. The expertly crafted sprite art has aged well, still perfectly embodying the style of the original cartoon. The soundtrack is still considered to be among the best the NES has to offer, with the moon level's music even *canonized* in the 2017 reboot of the animated TV series.

An excellent modern remake of the game by WayForward Technologies was released in 2013 for the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, WiiU, and PC. Simply titled *DuckTales Remastered*, the game actually featured extensive voice-overs starring much of the original cartoon series' cast. In 2017, Capcom published a genuine rerelease of the original game as part of the *Disney Afternoon Collection*, a compilation of Capcom's classic 8-bit Disney games for the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC. It also included the NES versions of *Chip 'n Dale's Rescue Rangers*, *TaleSpin*, and *Darkwing Duck*.

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Despite the game's imperfections, *DuckTales*' excellent gameplay and wonderful treatment of the beloved Disney IP has ensured the game continues to entertain and retain a loyal following after all these years. Sometimes the emotional impact a game has on its audience is its best feature, one that easily overshadows any technical or artistic shortcomings.

FUN FACT:

If Scrooge is ever low on health and has sufficient funds at hand, the player can simply press Select while standing still to purchase an instant heal for $3 million, but buyer beware: using the cheat too many times leaves Scrooge bankrupt, guaranteeing the player will get the bad ending upon completing the game!

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

DuckTales for the NES set a new standard for how developers should treat licensed IPs in video games. Capcom masterfully captured the adventuring spirit and whimsical character of the beloved Disney cartoon series with fantastic sprite art, a great soundtrack, and thoughtful game design that retains every bit of its original appeal and entertainment value to this day.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist

CHAPTER 19

EARTHBOUND

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: APE / HAL LABORATORY
1 PLAYER
1995

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What happens when you take a group of kids and thrust them into a sci-fi-driven, modern-day, coming-of-age story that explores existentialism? A JRPG that manages to stand out not only among some of the best of the genre and of the time, but among video games in general. *EarthBound* is a fascinating product from director Shigesato Itoi, and there's really nothing else quite like it (beyond other Itoi projects). So much about this game stands out and creates a timeless experience that has influenced the industry ever since, despite a few mechanics that haven't aged quite as well as the game itself.

Numerous attributes contribute to *EarthBound*'s deserved status as a cult classic. The America-inspired

modern setting and simple childlike perspective. The art direction, which contrasts heavily against plot themes of death, growing older, and existence itself. A wacky sense of humor and strange, trippy visuals.

As with many players, my first exposure to *EarthBound* was well after the game's original release. I discovered it with the smash hit *Super Smash Bros.*, where Ness, the main character of *EarthBound*, is a playable fighter. All I knew at the time was that he seemed like a typical kid with a bat, a yo-yo, and some psychic powers. For a long time that was essentially it. My not having a Super Nintendo and the general rarity of the cartridge made access to the game difficult. I recognize now that I probably could have just emulated it, but it never happened. In fact, it wasn't until 2013 that my love of *EarthBound* was firmly established.

In 2013, *EarthBound* saw release on the Wii U's virtual console with far more fanfare than games on the service typically received. The original Player's Guide was distributed with it as well, optimized for the Wii U's Gamepad. At this point in my gaming life I enjoyed experiencing major titles I missed out on during the '90s, and my interest was piqued. I downloaded the game on day one and played *EarthBound* for the first time. I found it exceptional and unlike anything else I had ever played. A few years later I played it on the Super NES Classic Edition miniconsole, thoroughly enjoying every moment.

EarthBound is a turn-based game that follows the journey of Ness, who, after experiencing a strange extraterrestrial encounter that turns various creatures, objects, and humans malicious, encounters a time-traveling bee from the future. Said bee recruits Ness on a quest to save the world. Starting in the town of Onett, Eagleland, Ness ventures to other cities such as Twoson, Threed, and Fourside. Along the way Ness meets allies; some are there to offer a little assistance, while a few notable others actually join Ness's cause.

Gameplay is fairly simple and familiar to anyone who has played a JRPG. It is separated into two major parts: exploration and combat. During exploration you'll discover new locations, reveal more of the story's events, talk to nonplayable characters, and shop at stores. Combat consists of taking turns to select an attack, ability, or item to defeat any of the numerous strange things that attempt to kill you, including crows, cars, and mushrooms.

One of the game's distinct features is that when you receive damage, the health counts or rolls downward from the point the attack happens, and isn't finalized until it's done. Some quick thinking can prevent a character from dying if they manage to initiate a healing of some sort before reaching zero. In addition, after you reach certain

levels, enemies run away from you, and if you do run into one, victory is assumed and combat isn't initiated—it simply grants victory and rewards. This is something I'd love to see implemented in more modern games, since it made revisiting earlier areas far more bearable. One aspect of *EarthBound* that hasn't aged particularly well is the item management. It's clunky and limited, requiring constant management, trading items between characters, and sending items to your sister for storage.

EarthBound is a fascinating and unique piece of localization—a Japanese game making references to US culture and settings. Then taking those references and presenting them in a way that connects with Japanese people. Then translated into English in a way that those same references can be enjoyed by the original culture in the same way. The challenges must have been immense. To translate American references back to Americans likely produced some of the most interesting choices in localization history and adds yet another layer on an already strange yet charming game.

Unfortunately, this also resulted in censorship between the Japanese and English versions due to Nintendo's concern about potential backlash from Americans. This includes removal of all references to child abuse or death, some possible misinterpretations of references to the KKK, and a potential copyright issue with the American Red Cross organization. Despite this, Itoi's original themes and moods still come through strongly, since he carefully has the darker tones permeate

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nearly every aspect of *EarthBound*'s story. Cults, zombies, corporate greed, kidnapping, and the general sense that adults kinda suck are too ingrained in the plot to completely alter or remove them.

Itoi said as much years later, as quoted in Clyde Mandelin's 2016 book, *Legends of Localization Book 2: EarthBound*: "I don't really know how the English translation actually turned out, but I do know some skilled people handled it. I could tell they had keen senses, so I was able to leave it all to them without a worry in the world."

A memorable piece of *EarthBound*'s history and experience is the *Earthbound Player's Guide* that was included with the game and its eye-catching big box to accommodate the book's inclusion. This player's guide is a walk-through, art showcase, and behind-the-scenes look all in one and was modeled after traditional real-world travel guides. It uses images, character art, and screenshots to showcase events, people, and points of interest in each major locale of the game. It also features extra story insights in the form of newspaper clippings from each city following Ness's adventure.

I experienced my playthrough with access to this book, since the Wii U version came with a digital version you could pull up on the Wii U Gamepad. Unfortunately, I couldn't enjoy the scratch-and-sniff cards to their fullest since I don't have the physical book, but it was still a lot of fun to use. It is a joyfully distinct and creative approach to game guides that I have yet to see replicated.

EarthBound is an amazing game no matter how you play it. From the meteor crash to the Runaway 5 concert. The battles against bosses such as Frank, Frankystein, the Mondo Mole, and Master Belch. Seeing the sites and getting your picture taken ("FUZZY PICKLES!"). Using the eraser to make pencil statues disappear, and the "eraser eraser" to erase erasers. WHACKling bats with bats. Traffic jams, shopping centers, a nightmare world, department store shopping, a monkey cave, an arcade full of bullies, quelling zombie outbreaks, breaking up cults—these are just a few of the many things that await those who play *EarthBound*.

On a console crowned by some "the King of JRPGs" in a time sometimes dubbed "the Golden Age of JRPGs," *EarthBound* went off and did its own thing. I have many friends who hold this game as their favorite or most influential game of their life, particularly their childhoods. It's easy to see why. It cuts its own path and stands out visually, aurally, and thematically. It dared to focus on the human condition and leave beating up evil monsters with swords to other games.

EarthBound's impact can be seen throughout gaming history, but probably most notably as being the inspiration for the visual direction for the original *Pokémon* games due to its simpler and "childlike" sprite work. Though I did not experience this game in my childhood, it has certainly stuck with me, and I count myself among those who hold this game near and dear to their heart. With that, thank you Shigesato Itoi for providing the world with this exceptional (and kinda weird) piece of gaming and everything it has inspired.

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FUN FACT:

EarthBound was the second game in the Mother series. The games are famous for almost never using kanji, instead relying on hiragana and katakana writing systems. This can make it an easier game for fledgling Japanese-language learners to play, since kanji can take decades to master. The voice clip heard when selecting "OK" on the naming screen saying, "Okay 'ska?" (Japanese for "Is that okay?") is voiced by game director Shigesato Itoi.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

EarthBound has stood the test of time with its focus on humanity, characterization, and not being afraid to get weird and silly. Breaking genre by featuring a modern setting, a cute art direction, and tackling some intensely deep issues may have turned people away initially, but those things are exactly what makes the game a cult classic.

—Joseph Siemsen, freelance animator, creator of YouTube channel Daddy Gamer Reviews, and cohost of Forever Classic podcast

CHAPTER 20

EARTHWORM JIM 2

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: PLAYMATES INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: SHINY ENTERTAINMENT
1 PLAYER
1995

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In 1995, most guys my age were likely hanging up posters of their favorite bands or sports cars on their bedroom walls. As an aspiring game developer and artist, I was too busy playing video games and reading *Nintendo Power* or *GamePro* to have time for things like cars or grunge music. I'd been immensely impressed with the original *Earthworm Jim* the year before, along with the previous games developed by the team at Shiny Entertainment such as *Cool Spot* and Disney's *Aladdin* on the Sega Genesis, and from the moment I first found out about the inevitable sequel to *Earthworm Jim*, I began following its development as closely as the gaming media of the day would allow.

As beautiful as I knew the game's graphics were bound to be, I was blown away by the game's phenomenal promotional art in magazines, the franchise's characters brought to life through the incredible retro sci-fi art of illustrator Michael Koelsch. I bought said magazines just so I could cut the full-page ads out and thumbtack them to the walls of my bedroom. I usually avoided drawing "fan art," even as a kid, preferring to draw my own characters and designs, but there was something mesmerizing about the art of the *Earthworm Jim* games. I loved drawing Jim, and I loved the aesthetic of the universe he lived in. A perfect mélange of the work of Chuck Jones and Tim Burton, *Earthworm Jim 2* forever cemented in place my dream of making video games, burning itself into my imagination and continuing to influence me even now, decades later and well into my career as a developer.

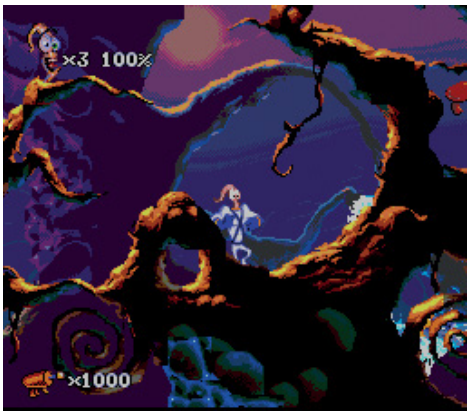
Shiny Entertainment's lovingly crafted follow-up to 1994's critically acclaimed *Earthworm Jim*, *Earthworm Jim 2* is a humorous and absurdly surreal single-player, 2-D, side-scrolling action platformer originally released for the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo in November 1995, and likewise received comparably favorable reviews to its predecessor. Primarily led by designer/programmer David Perry and artist Doug Tennaple (who also voiced the title character), development of *Earthworm Jim 2* began shortly after the first game's release, using a number of ideas and design concepts from the original title's "cutting-room floor."

Employing an improved version of Shiny's "Digicel" technology for digitally capturing traditional cel animation that was used for both *Earthworm Jim* and its spiritual predecessor *Aladdin*, the game features incredible character animation that feels more like a Saturday morning cartoon than a mere 16-bit video game. The protagonist, Jim, an earthworm sporting a mechanized spacesuit, has a vast array of moves available in-game (even his idle animations are polished and amusing to watch). He can aim his trademark worm-blaster ray gun in twice as many directions as most gun-toting game characters of the era. He can climb ledges, use his head for a whip, swing from monkey bars with his head, and even inflate his head with helium to fly. Jim's sidekick, a slimy green mass of phlegm named "Snot" that lives in his backpack, can be used as a grapple line or even a parachute (replacing Jim's "helicopter-head" move from the first game).

The game's surreal, wildly imaginative levels put Jim to the test, requiring all of his innate abilities and a few unexpected talents to help him rescue Princess What's-Her-Name yet again from the clutches of the vile Psy-Crow. The insane level designs are a visual feast and an overall improvement on the first game's occasionally confusing platforming gameplay. Most of the levels are straightforward platforming experiences, but with little touches and design nuances that make them unique and truly entertaining. The opening level, titled "Anything but Tangerines," is a visually rich demonstration of the franchise's wonderful design philosophy of avoiding squared-off and planar platforms, a tapestry of interwoven paths and beautiful layers of parallax scrolling backgrounds and foregrounds. Just watch out for falling grandmas on stair lifts, and brace yourself for one of the most hilarious boss fights in the history of video games as Jim faces off against Bob the Fish in an obvious tribute to *Mortal Kombat*.

The level "Lorenzen's Soil," featuring lead pipes as platforms, has Jim using his worm-blaster to literally carve his way through a wooden nest of termites and battling against Pedro Pupa, a giant grub riding a unicycle. The "Puppy Love" intermission levels are actually a single-screen minigame that recurs throughout the adventure and features Jim frantically trying to save returning character Peter Puppy's puppies as Psy-Crow himself heartlessly tosses them from the windows of a dilapidated multistory shack straight out of a Tim Burton movie. Jim must use a giant marshmallow to safely bounce the puppies across the screen and into a chute atop Peter Puppy's doghouse, but if he misses too many puppies (which splatter on the ground in horrific fashion), he faces the gnarly wrath of an enraged Peter Puppy.

Other levels include a romp through a bureaucratic wasteland of endless paperwork while evading homicidal filing cabinets ("ISO 9000"), a swimming trip through a CGI-rendered intestinal tract while disguised as a blind cave salamander ("The Villi People"), and even a helium-induced trip through a vertically oriented circus while avoiding the dastardly antics of none other than Evil the Cat ("Inflatable Head"). To top it all off, the game ends with a footrace against Psy-Crow himself through an "art deco in space" obstacle course in a chase to reach the captive Princess What's-Her-Name first ("Run, Jim, Run"). Such is the humor and subversive nature that permeates *Earthworm Jim 2*, simultaneously parodying the design tropes of the day while actually succeeding at most of them better than many of its contemporaries.



The fantastic character animations, lush environment art, and incredible sound effects and music bring the game to life in every scenario Jim finds himself in. The stellar soundtrack by Tommy Tallarico, mostly comprising electronic arrangements of classical music along with a few original compositions, perfectly accompanies every part of *Earthworm Jim 2* and is one of the best sounding on either the SNES or Sega Genesis (the a cappella doo-wop title track is perfect). Though the 16-bit releases are virtually identical, the music tracks and sampled audio effects in the game do sound cleaner on the Nintendo platform, which also boasts slightly richer color palettes with more-detailed backgrounds and other minor visual flourishes scattered throughout the game (the waterfall in the background of "Anything but Tangerines" is a sight to behold but is exclusive to the SNES version). Play control is also slightly more intuitive on the six-button SNES controller versus the Sega Genesis three-button configuration. Ultimately this is only a minor issue, but it does slightly affect gameplay, with the Genesis version lacking the ability to switch between weapons, forcing players to use weapon power-ups once collected instead of allowing them to be used strategically in levels or boss fights as in the SNES version.

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The humor and personality of *Earthworm Jim 2*—its veritable heart and soul—transcend the limitations of the hardware it was originally designed for. The game might not necessarily have the same amount of overall content or level of challenge as other titles in the genre from its time (the game can be completed in under two hours even without using any of its various built-in cheats), but it more than makes up for these shortcomings with pure artistry and creative passion that has managed to keep even this jaded gamer still playing and laughing all these years later.

FUN FACT:

Just to make sure Earthworm Jim 2 truly nails all the 2-D side-scroller tropes, the game even includes a secret level. Near the end of "Level Ate," use Jim's Snot-chute to carefully glide downward and between a set of three forks and a bacon strip platform to enter the hidden world of "Totally Forked!"

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Featuring gorgeous art with engaging and entertaining gameplay, Earthworm Jim 2 is a master class in 16-bit platform game design, the culmination of everything the genre has to offer, all while parodying and subverting the gaming tropes of its day in a truly hilarious fashion that actually makes it a better game than many of the very titles it pays homage to.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist

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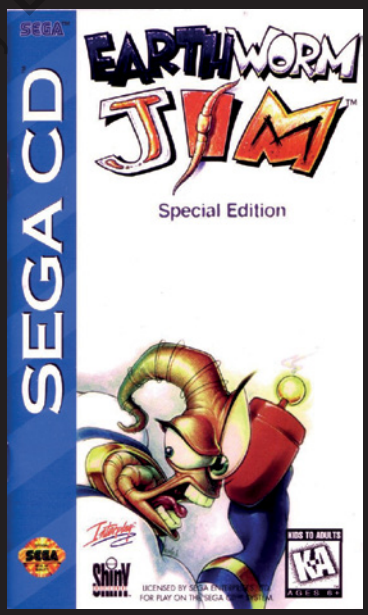
CHAPTER 21

EARTHWORM JIM: SPECIAL EDITION



SEGA CD
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: INTERPLAY ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: SHINY ENTERTAINMENT
1 PLAYER
1995

Until I started writing this essay for the very book you're holding in your hands, I'd mostly forgotten just how excited I was to play the original *Earthworm Jim* in 1994. While the home games market was taking its first, trepidatious steps into 3-D gaming with the likes of *Star Fox* on the Super Nintendo and *Virtua Racing* on the Genesis, we were still a couple of years away from consoles that could push an impressive number of polygons, and from console manufacturers who had decided that great 2-D games were yesterday's news.

The likes of Nintendo, Sega, Capcom, and Konami had been churning out great 2-D platformers for the better part of a decade, but in recent years Virgin Games had come on strong, mixing solid gameplay with stunning animation thanks to a core team of developers and artists who realized that presentation was almost as important as mechanics. The groundwork laid in games such as *Cool Spot* and *Global Gladiators* culminated in the absolutely stunning *Aladdin* for the Genesis, which set a new standard for what character animation could be in a video game.

So imagine the excitement around the formation of Shiny Entertainment, featuring a core team made up of the minds behind *Aladdin* but with the limiter off. These geniuses were no longer beholden to licensors such as Disney or McDonald's. Creative freedom! The anticipation around Shiny's first project was palpable.

Earthworm Jim didn't disappoint. The game featured even more impressive animation than that found in *Aladdin*, and, with a character consisting of an earthworm in a powered suit, offered players much more variety and absurdity than anything this team produced at Virgin Games.

Jim can run, jump, fire a variety of projectiles from his hand cannon, use his earthworm body as a whip to attack enemies or swing from place to place Indiana Jones style, and ride his pocket rocket from one level to the next.

One creative level after another sees Jim jumping and swinging from platform to platform while destroying or avoiding a rogue's gallery of enemies—birds who try to pluck his worm body from his suit, junkyard dogs who attack on sight, and lawyers in hell who threaten to sue when Jim takes them out. The boss fights are just as interesting. Jim engages in a bungee-jumping contest with Major Mucus over a pool of toxic snot. He has to kill Evil the Cat nine times before he stops coming back to life. One of my favorite gags in the game is the boss fight with Bob the Goldfish, which simply requires Jim to knock his bowl off the table and leave him flopping around on the floor. Great stuff!

Earthworm Jim continues with the more organic style of platforming found in *Aladdin*, where platforms don't necessarily look like objects floating above the level backgrounds and where paths sometimes exist in 3-D space, meaning that running all the way to the right of a given area and then turning around and running left may send Jim along a different route than he previously traversed. An argument can be made that this style makes the platforming a bit more difficult at first while players adjust to it, but it results in an undeniably more fluid experience. Even within some relatively small areas, Jim can move throughout the space in creative ways, uncovering secret weapon caches and power-ups while seeming as though he's in the world, rather than on top of it.

If any criticism can be leveled at *Earthworm Jim*, it's that it's on the short side. I remember buying it on the day it was released, rushing home, and finishing the game within a couple of hours. And while I wasn't disappointed (and our expectations for play time were much lower back in 1994), I definitely would have been happier with more.

Enter *Earthworm Jim: Special Edition*. This Sega CD and PC exclusive is basically a director's cut of the original cartridge game. Right from the opening Sega logo screen, you're treated to a hilarious pencil-test gag reel that lets you know you're about to experience something special. The absurdity has been ratcheted up to 11 here.

The most obvious improvement made to *Special Edition* is the inclusion of the Big Bruty level, in which Jim has to navigate a shadowy area stalked by a giant, blind creature who is impervious to attack and will chase our hero relentlessly. If Big Bruty (named after art director Nick Bruty) catches Jim, he eats him in one bone-crunching bite. It's a weird, atmospheric level that slows down the action a bit and requires you to solve a series of traversal puzzles, and is a really nice addition to an already excellent game. It also exists only in *Earthworm Jim: Special Edition*, since subsequent remakes didn't include Big Bruty.

But that's not the only improvement offered by *Special Edition*. Obviously, since this is a CD-based version, the soundtrack is now CD-quality redbook audio. This improvement makes a world of difference, especially in the What the Heck level, where the tune alternates between elevator music and Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain."

Other updates have been made as well. New Junk City features a section where Jim falls out of his suit and has to navigate the world "nude" to find it. Various other levels have similar facelifts. Finally, *Special Edition* features multiple endings based on the difficulty setting on which you're playing, including a hilarious reading

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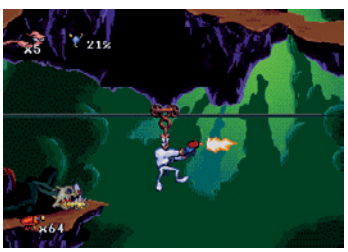
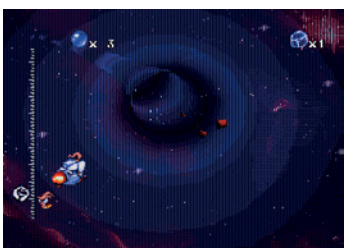




of mostly false worm facts and the game's credits as they scroll up the screen way too quickly for anyone to keep up.

Earthworm Jim was a landmark title in the mid-1990s. Proof that a great platforming game could come from somewhere other than Japan and that slapstick comedy and great gameplay could coexist. *EarthWorm Jim: Special Edition* is the ultimate version of a game from a team filled with amazing artists and developers at the peak of their 16-bit power!

FUN FACT:

Earthworm Jim spawned toys and a short-lived cartoon show that ran for 23 episodes (1995–1996) on Kids' WB. Most of the major characters from the game appeared and were voiced by actors such as Ben Stein, Brad Garrett, and Dan "Homer Simpson" Castellaneta as Jim himself.

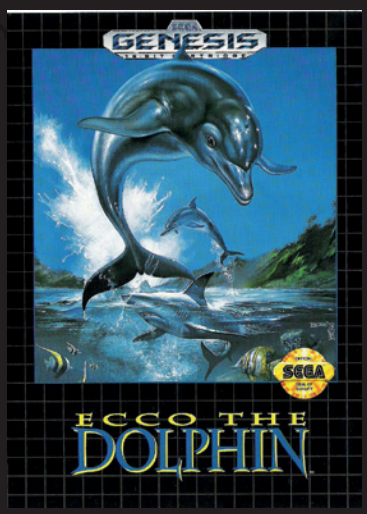
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Refined controls, a versatile character filled with personality, and wonderfully varied levels come together to create a game that is an absolute pleasure to play.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

CHAPTER 22

ECCO THE DOLPHIN



SEGA GENESIS / SEGA CD
GENRE: ACTION/ADVENTURE
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: NOVOTRADE
1 PLAYER
1992 (1993 SEGA CD)

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Sega was riding high in 1991. Rather than withering under the pressure of Nintendo releasing the Super Nintendo in North America—a system that had enjoyed record launch-day sales in Japan and the follow-up to the console that had revived the home gaming market in the West—Sega kicked into a gear no one had seen before. While Nintendo banked on a mascot who made Mickey Mouse look edgy, Sonic the Hedgehog's super speed and attitude appealed more to teenage gamers, not to mention youngsters who wanted to emulate their older siblings. Shot for shot, Sega had an answer to pretty much everything Nintendo put out—the Genesis had more games, faster games, and, most importantly, cooler games.

You could get top-notch football, hockey, and basketball games on the Genesis. You could race motorbikes down American highways while pounding your opponents into the pavement. You could beat down bad guys as an iconic wall-crawling superhero. And the whole thing was wrapped up in one of the most arrogant, antagonistic marketing campaigns in the history of the industry. Sega had masterfully tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of the early '90s.

Imagine being a producer at Sega during this time, pitching a nonviolent game that takes place in the depths of the ocean where you play as a dolphin. I'm sure Ed Annunziata's superiors thought he was just a little crazy. As the then project development manager Clyde Grossman so succinctly put it during one pitch session: "Who wants to be a f*cking fish?"

But Annunziata persisted. He'd been kicking this idea around for years. During his days creating educational software at Sunburst Communications, he worked on a product called *The Voyage of Mimi*, which had touched on the echolocation ability of dolphins. And eventually he was given the green light to put together a product demo, for which he contracted developer Novotrade. It was the beginning of a long-running relationship.

Everything about *Ecco* is simple, from the story to the gameplay mechanics. One day while frolicking with his pod, Ecco leaps high into the sky just as a mysterious vortex sucks all the aquatic life nearby out of the ocean. Ecco is alone and sets out on a quest to find his missing family. To do this he must swim through open ocean and deep trenches, avoiding predators, finding pockets of air to breathe, and eating fish to maintain his health.

It's a straightforward design that just works. When you're tasked with diving deeper and deeper into the ocean, your heart rate picks up as you begin to wonder where—or if—you'll find that next cache of precious oxygen. You activate Ecco's sonar ability and bounce it off the walls around you, scanning the resulting map for bubbles and then racing in that direction as Ecco's life ebbs away for want of air. The deeper you go, the darker the world around you becomes. An obvious technique for replicating the crushing sense of danger and loneliness one must feel on the ocean floor.

Making Ecco feel like a graceful creature sliding through the water had to be the biggest challenge facing the developers at Novotrade, especially when the controller interface was an eight-way digital d-pad. No analog sticks in 1992! And while there is a definite learning curve here, it doesn't take too long to come to grips with Ecco's sense of momentum and speed. You're soon making spectacular leaps over small rock outcroppings and charging through danger with the greatest of ease.

That's not to say the game isn't challenging. In fact, it gets brutally difficult pretty fast. You're controlling an almost defenseless dolphin with a built-in timer in the form of an oxygen meter. There are many terrors in the deep, and most of them zero in on Ecco the second he's within range. And this is by design. Ed Annunziata has gone on record saying that he was so paranoid about kids beating the game during a weekend rental—something that seems to have informed the difficulty of a lot of Genesis games—that he intentionally ratcheted up the challenge in *Ecco*.

This game is deceptive. On the surface (ocean pun!) it's a simple tale about a dolphin searching for his family. But dive a bit deeper and you uncover a story about an ancient civilization, time travel, and an evil alien known as the Vortex, which harvests life from Earth's waters every 500 years. And there's not a human in sight, since Annunziata pushed back hard at the suggestion of including boats or divers in the game. If you look closely you can see some ruined human structures on distant islands when you come up for air, but that's about it.

A year after the game's release on the Genesis, Sega dropped an enhanced version for the Sega CD that featured a couple of extra levels, some play balancing, and a few *National Geographic*–style video files to find in the Atlantean library. Most notably, though, was the conversion of the already lovely musical score to full redbook audio. In this form the tunes are simply breathtaking. In the end, this weird little game became a bestseller and has since been a staple of Sega's library, appearing on countless collections of the publisher's greatest hits in subsequent decades.

While *Ecco the Dolphin* doesn't fit the mold of the too-cool attitude Sega was banking on at the time, it did further the company's growing reputation for taking

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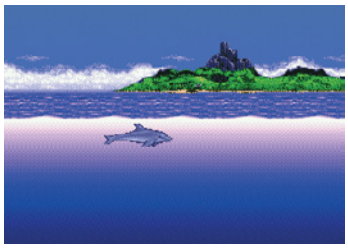

bold chances. Alongside games such as *ToeJam & Earl*, it proved that Sega wasn't willing to rest on its laurels and pigeonhole its developers.

FUN FACT:

Ecco the Dolphin represents one of the few times that a game received a Limited Box Set on the Genesis. Exclusive to the UK, the set included the game, a shirt, a dolphin adoption certificate from the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, and a cassette called The Dolphin Tape featuring music from bands such as U2, Shakespears Sister, and Erasure. Proceeds went to support an adopted dolphin named Ecco.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Ecco the Dolphin is a uniquely creative game that is way more fun and interesting than it should be. Plus it is its own genre.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

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CHAPTER 23

FINAL FANTASY III

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT
DEVELOPER: SQUARESOFT
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

For many RPG fans, *Final Fantasy III* is THE game to play. Never mind the fact that we are close to being 30 years removed from when the game came out. To many gamers, if you are going to play an RPG for the first time, this is it. Originally released in Japan as *Final Fantasy VI* (*Final Fantasy II* and *III* on the Famicom and *V* on the Super Famicom were not released outside Japan at the time), *Final Fantasy III* in the US was one of the biggest adventures that console gamers had seen up to that point. Contemporaneous magazines touted gameplay times of up to 60 hours, which was massive. Granted, you could take that long if you are trying to find every single thing that the game has to offer, but you're probably looking at more like a 30-to-40-hour

experience. However you like to play, the game is packed full of action, story, side quests, and more.

Development for *Final Fantasy III* began in 1992, immediately after the international release of *Final Fantasy V*, and the entire project was completed in just one year. This was a herculean feat by the staff, considering how much the game has to offer. From the detailed character designs, to the enhanced animations, to the character backstories, to the battle system, to the musical score, this game has so much going for it that it makes it that much more impressive to think that they were able to get it done in roughly 365 days.

The game opens by revealing some of the history of the world that we are about to enter. We learn that the War of the Magi ravaged the land 100 years ago and that after the war, magic ceased to exist. This gave way to the rise of technology and explains the game's steampunk aesthetic, as opposed to the medieval setting that we were used to seeing in the previous entries in the series. The game also informs us that those in power are seeking to reclaim the destructive force known as "magic." From here, we are introduced to three people operating bipedal machines called Magitek Armor. One of these is the first of many playable characters that we meet, named Terra, a young woman who has lost her memory. After our brief introduction we are treated to a brilliant cinema as the three armors march across a snowy field toward a town in the distance that gets closer and closer as the scene plays out in all of its Mode 7 glory, accompanied by Nobuo Uematsu's haunting score. This opening alone lets you know that you are embarking on a kind of adventure that you have never been on before.

One unique aspect of the game is that there is no clear protagonist. In a May 2015 interview published on Gamesradar.com, the game's director, Yoshinori Kitase, said that they began work on the title "with the idea that every character is the protagonist." There are 11 main playable characters, two hidden characters, and one that you can lose completely in the second half of the game if you make the wrong choice at a certain part of the game.

Each character comes with their own playing style. Want to steal items for the enemy? Use Locke. Want to deal tons of physical damage? Sabin, Edgar, Shadow, and Cyan are your characters, each with their own brand of dealing punishment. Celes, Terra, Relm, and Strago have you covered in the magic department, where each character has unique magical abilities. Feeling lucky? With Setzer's Slot attack you might just be able to defeat the enemy in one move. Or you might wipe your own party out too. Do you like what one character just did? Gogo can mimic their action and either inflict more damage or cast another lifesaving spell. Want something more random? With Mog's Dancing Attacks and the uncontrollable nature of the Yeti, who knows what will happen.

With 14 characters total, that is a lot of information to juggle around to tell a coherent story. Luckily for the development team, the backstories weren't left to one individual to work on alone. According to Kitase, they worked in a "melting pot" where each team member developed the story of a couple of characters. Hitase himself worked on Celes and Gau, series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi developed Locke and Terra, and so on. Once the story pieces were put together, Kitase then had the task of putting the puzzle together. Somehow he figured out a way to tell the story of a slave, a thief (er, treasure hunter), a king, a fighter, a knight, a gambler, a feral child, a general, a mercenary, a sage, an artist, a moogle (Kupo!), a mime, and a yeti. The story not only worked but has stood the test of time.

Final Fantasy III, like other games in the series, is a turn-based RPG where the enemies and player take turns by either attacking, defending, or healing their parties. Something that helps this system of gameplay stand out from others in the genre is that you can actually see the timer filling up to let you know when a character's turn is coming up. This comes in handy when you are desperate for someone to heal the party or you need a huge attack to finish off the enemy. While it does help you plan your strategy, I can't think of how many times while playing I'd be watching the timer fill up, going, "C'MON C'MON C'MON" as I waited so that I could give my characters some much-needed healing. A new feature found in *Final Fantasy III* is that in the menu you can actually select to play with two players simultaneously during the battle sequences. While Player 1 will control the action in the overworld, you can assign different characters to each player to control while fighting the enemies, which is something that not many turn-based RPGs had done at that point.

The aforementioned unique attributes for each character make each playthrough different from the last, if you so choose. For example, Sabin is a martial arts fighter and his special ability is Blitz, which are powerful attacks that require *Street Fighter II*–style controller techniques for you to pull them off. Sabin's brother, Edgar, uses different machines to help fight the enemy. The knight, Cyan, brandishes his SwordTech, where a meter builds up so that the longer you let it fill, the more devastating an attack he will perform. This system lets you pick and choose how you want to play the game.

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The customization factor really stands out in *Final Fantasy III*. Kitase said that he "feels that this game helped popularize the customizable features seen in future games." While each character has their basic functions, you can change how each character handles on the basis of the types of relics that you equip. You can boost attack, defense, and magic stats. While only a few characters can inherently learn magic, almost any character can learn magic later in the game by equipping Magicite, which are the remains of fallen ancient beings called Espers. Depending on what kind of Esper you have equipped on characters when they level up, they might also get stat boosts to further add to the amount of customizing that you can do with every character in the game.

Early in the game you are led to believe that Emperor Gestahl is the bad guy that you need to defeat. However, you learn that Kefka is the true villain at about the halfway point. You meet Kefka early on, and he's just annoying at first. But then you get a glimpse of how evil he is when he poisons the water supply in the town of Doma, leading to the death of the wife and child of one of your characters, Cyan. Kefka is what truly makes this game stand out. He is unusual among villains in that—SPOILER ALERT—he wins. He set out to destroy the world and does. He rules over the remains while keeping the survivors in fear until you can reunite your team and finally defeat him over a year later. The fact that he even tastes victory is truly stunning.

Regarding the music, longtime *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu came up with something really special. There are themes for each character and each town, several different kinds of battle music, and three overworld themes. My favorite piece, "Dancing Mad," is four musical movements in one and an impressive work of art. The piece that stands out for many is the Opera Scene. In this part of the game, Celes must perform in an opera, and you have to give her the correct prompts so that she can sing the song properly and then guide her correctly to move on to the next task in the game. What makes this special is the fact that she really does "sing" in the game. With the use of digitization, this is the first time in the series that players hear someone's voice in the game.

When *Final Fantasy III* was released it was heavily praised. *GamePro* gave it an almost perfect score, *EGM* scored it 9 out of 10 and named it their game of the month, and *Game Players* gave it a 98%, the highest score they had given a game up to that point. In 2007, IGN ranked it the ninth-best video game of all time. In 2012, in the final issue of *Nintendo Power*, the editors ranked it their fourth-favorite game of all time.

Final Fantasy III has made a lasting impression on the gaming world for almost 30 years, and it is likely to do so for at least another 30.

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FUN FACT:

Final Fantasy III is the first time that Biggs (Vicks in the US version due to a translation error) and Wedge appear in a Final Fantasy game. They are named after Biggs Darklighter and Wedge Antilles, the Red Squadron wingmen from Star Wars.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Final Fantasy III defines the genre in terms of what makes it so great, it has a wonderful story to tell, and it is still a favorite among countless gamers today. It has been and will always be a classic.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming-4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast

CHAPTER 24

FINAL FANTASY VII

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: SQUARESOFT
1 PLAYER
1997

You can debate it all you want, but in the annals of gaming, there is no more iconic role-playing game than *Final Fantasy VII*. With more than 10 million copies sold worldwide, *Final Fantasy VII* is the bestselling RPG and second-bestselling title overall for the original PlayStation (just behind *Gran Turismo*). Spanning three CD-ROMs, *Final Fantasy VII* is also one of the largest PS1 games in terms of sheer size and scope. With a development budget of more than $45 million in the late '90s (equivalent to more than $72 million in 2020 with inflation) and a total marketing budget of more than $100 million, it's one of the most expensive video games ever produced. As #8 on Ranker.com's list of the greatest games of all time (if you removed all the Mario games it would be #4), *Final Fantasy VII*'s popularity and timeless staying power are undeniable.

Released in North America in 1997 by Square Enix, *Final Fantasy VII* was one of the first of many RPGs to hit the PlayStation. When *Secret of Mana* (Square Soft, 1993) was relegated to the Super Nintendo after the infamous falling out between Nintendo and Sony, the design team at Square subsequently diverted their efforts away from collaborating with Nintendo and forged forward in their goal to produce a massive and intricate CD-ROM-based title that would essentially serve as the inspiration for nearly every future RPG. The PS1 was the most viable platform to accomplish such a thing, and the ultimate result is one of near perfection. Free of the technological drawbacks of Nintendo's cartridge-based Nintendo 64, Sony's debut console would provide Square Enix's project with all the muscle it would need.

Final Fantasy VII centers on a hired gun (sword, actually) named Cloud Strife who is contracted to assist the eco-terrorist group Avalanche with the elimination of a pollution-producing power plant that is slowly destroying their planet. The plot exponentially thickens when Cloud and his allies stumble upon a mysterious biological specimen and soon learn that there are much more sinister powers at play. Through its masterful narrative and phenomenally crafted cast of characters, *Final Fantasy VII* explores themes of revenge, friendship, betrayal, romance, parenthood, personal loss, selflessness, classism, fascism, and willpower.

In the wake of the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming, the story of *Final Fantasy VII* was a refreshing departure from perpetual princess saving and similar tropes. Like *Secret of Mana* and *Phantasy Star* (Sega, 1987), *Final Fantasy VII* seamlessly blends ancient and futuristic motifs. One minute, you're fighting giant snakes with a sword; the next, you're launching yourself into space aboard a rocket ship. Additionally, *Final Fantasy VII*'s many locales draw inspiration from a multitude of sources: feudal Japan, cyberpunk, urban sprawl, Native American, coastal South American, agrarian midwestern US, and glitzy Las Vegas. Despite the game's absence of vocalized words, the characters' dialogue text deftly reflects and bolsters the authenticity of each new area you explore. This world feels organic, alive, and believable.

Visually, *Final Fantasy VII* was a modern marvel. As the most visually recognizable title in the Final Fantasy franchise, *Final Fantasy VII* deviated from the traditional 2-D layout of its predecessors and instead incorporated 3-D elements in its character designs and

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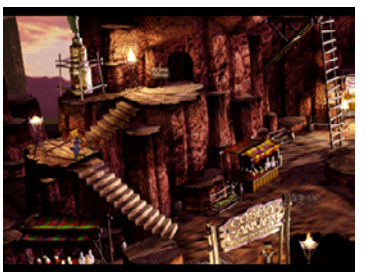
overworld maps. The merger of prerendered 2-D backgrounds with animated 3-D objects gives *Final Fantasy VII* a sense of depth and beauty the likes of which the industry had never seen before.

The vast, eclectic orchestral score by legendary Nobuo Uematsu has often been referred to as one of the finest soundtracks in video game history. It's as gorgeous as it is diverse. Uematsu revisits several recognizable tunes from previous *Final Fantasy* games but dials them up several notches, making full use of the PS1's CD-quality capabilities. Born in 1959 in Kōchi Prefecture, Japan, Nobuo Uematsu became a self-taught musician when he began teaching himself how to play piano at age 11. In 1985, Uematsu began his work with Square and would compose soundtracks for several games, including *Rad Racer* (1987) and *King's Knight* (1987) for the Nintendo Entertainment System, but would predominantly become known for his contributions to Square's RPG franchises, such as *Final Fantasy* and *SaGa*. Uematsu once remarked, "I hope that eventually there would be an occasion which I can personally prove that game music can, in fact, impress many different people and move them." Mission accomplished, Uematsu-san. Mission accomplished.

Borrowing from *Final Fantasy IV* (1991), *Final Fantasy VII* uses the Active Time Battle (ATB) system by default when engaging in combat scenarios. This semi-turn-based paradigm made for deeply cerebral and up-tempo battles while maintaining a deliberate pace and comparatively more realistic feel than many other RPGs of its day. The ATB system resembles traditional turn-based method, but with the addition of a time bar that fills between actions, eventually permitting your character to activate the next set of actions in the fight, whether it be to attack, use magic, activate a specific skill, defend, retreat, summon a guardian to assist in the battle, and more. Through the game's options menu, the ATB system can be tweaked to better suit the player's preferences or abandoned in favor of bona fide turn-based combat altogether.

The two adjectives that perhaps best describe *Final Fantasy VII* are "big" and "deep." Big in that everything about *Final Fantasy VII* exists on such a grandiose scale. Big enemies, big swords, big guns, big world, and big emotions. The moods evoked by *Final Fantasy VII* vary spectacularly from chapter to chapter. Moments of gravity (there's a "materia" joke in there somewhere) are fantastically interspersed with comedic highlights and even occasional romantic undertones for good measure. And, as previously touched upon, *Final Fantasy VII* is deep in that it explores some truly concerning



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real-world issues such as environmental consciousness, the consequences of genetic experimentation, warmongering and profiteering, and even the loss of loved ones.

For those familiar with *Final Fantasy VII*, you probably already know that it features one of gaming's most iconic and shocking character deaths ever (sidenote: during a casual conversation, an EB Games employee thoughtlessly spoiled that plot point prior to my reaching it in my initial playthrough . . . son of a b!%@#!!!). Details aside, THAT death scene in *Final Fantasy VII* is as paramount to the video-gaming world as any in classic cinema.

As legendary and awesome as *Final Fantasy VII* is, some of the game's elements have unfortunately not aged as well as others. And while the merits of high-quality storytelling are timeless and undeniable, technological advancements sometimes have a way of retroactively reframing our opinions of classic games. What was visually groundbreaking in 1997 isn't so much so in 2022. The polygonized low-res 3-D designs of yesteryear have been replaced in newer games with photorealistic, motion-captured, high-definition character models. Text-based dialogue has given way to oftentimes Oscar-worthy voice acting. Subsequent RPGs and MMORPGs continue to push the boundaries of expansive and intricate adventuring experiences. With all that said, *Final Fantasy VII* is still very much a high-quality title—at the risk of sounding cliché, it's absolutely a "must-play" game. Maybe it just needed a fresh coat of paint.

That coat of paint would thankfully come in 2020, a full 23 years after *Final Fantasy VII*'s initial launch. You can only imagine my sheer bliss when it was divulged in 2015 that not only would Square Enix port the technically superior PC version of *Final Fantasy VII* to the PlayStation 4 console, but that *Final Fantasy VII* would officially reemerge as a fully remade multivolume incarnation!

When the first episodic release of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* arrived in 2020, it instantly reignited players' passion for the game in stellar fashion. It now sits prominently displayed among my *Final Fantasy VII* music CDs, my life-sized replica Buster Sword, my *Final Fantasy VII* key chain collection, and the official *Final Fantasy VII* T-shirt I received as a promo when I preordered the game at EB Games over two decades ago.

FUN FACT:

Nobuo Uematsu composed the opening portion of Sephiroth's theme song, "One-Winged Angel," as an homage to the Jimi Hendrix Experience's song "Purple Haze." And now you'll officially never hear either song the same way again. You're welcome.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Soon after its 1997 release, Final Fantasy VII was referred to by GameFan magazine as "quite possibly the greatest game ever made." Over two decades later that argument still holds. To this day, the PS1 version of Final Fantasy VII maintains a solid aggregate score of 92% across all major reviews—many of which gave the game perfect or near-perfect marks, including 1Up.com, Electronic Gaming Monthly, GamePro, GameSpot, Next Generation, OPM, and PSM. As a 2018 inductee into the Strong National Museum of Play's World Video Game Hall of Fame, Final Fantasy VII's quality, influence, and indelible appeal are unrivaled.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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CHAPTER 25

FINAL FIGHT CD

SEGA CD
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

Final Fight wasn't the first belt-scrolling fighter, and you could argue that it wasn't even the best brawler out there when it hit arcades in 1989. But it's hard to deny that it was one of the most influential coin-op games of its time. Every arcade you went to had a machine, and everyone you knew had played it at least once.

That wasn't a mistake. *Final Fight* was created explicitly to appeal to American players and their love of games such as *Double Dragon*. As creator Akira Nishitani put it in a 1991 interview, "Fighting stuff sells really well in America, and with this game we were trying to check off all the boxes for a successful American game. For example, we tried to keep the flow of the game going (no interruptions), and we added a map so you could know where you are, and how far you had to go in the stage" (Capcom 1991 Retrospective, retrieved from shmuplations.com/capcom1991/).

As the game's story goes, recently elected mayor Mike Haggar has brought the crime rate in Metro City down to record lows. The criminals are desperate, since this professional wrestler turned politician can't be bought. One gang, the Mad Gear, resorts to kidnapping Mike's daughter Jessica and demands he turn a blind eye to their bad behavior. In response, Haggar decides to take to the streets and tear through the gang to get his daughter back. To do this he recruits Jessica's boyfriend Cody and their mutual friend Guy. This could *not* be a more '80s plot.

Final Fight is a wonderful example of less is more. Rather than trying to "fix" the genre by adding more-complicated play mechanics, simplicity is the name of the game. Players have three brawlers to choose from: Mayor Mike Haggar is slow and powerful, Cody is the average everyman, and Guy is quick and relatively weak. Most of the moves are based on context—tap the singular attack button multiple times while hitting an enemy and you're treated to a simple combo of punches and kicks. Each of our heroes has a couple of jump kicks and throws as well. And tapping the punch and kick buttons together results in an area-clearing desperation move that will sap some of your life bar.

The point is that all three characters are easy to control, using similar commands for almost every move. Each has a unique special move: Mike can pile-drive enemies, Cody is all about knife attacks (his two companions throw them away immediately), and Guy is able to jump off walls to launch a special attack.

The whole thing is wrapped up in some of the best graphics to be found in arcades in 1989. *Final Fight* features massive characters, and there sure are a lot of them on screen at all times. Yes, that makes *Final Fight* sound extremely shallow, but it's a wonderful distillation of the genre down to its most basic elements, then executed perfectly.

So yeah, it was kind of a big deal when the Super Nintendo received a home version of the game. Except fans of the original were expected to accept a few too many compromises. Smaller characters and slightly reduced animations were par for the course in home ports of arcade games in 1991. However, it was harder to swallow the missing level, missing two-player mode, and, most egregiously, the complete omission of the character Guy.

Capcom somewhat rectified this last offense by putting out *Final Fight Guy* (a Blockbuster exclusive in North America), though users still didn't get two-player

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action and were then asked to give up playing as Cody.

Speaking as a Genesis kid, I was never impressed with the SNES version of *Final Fight*. Plus, Sega managed to deliver *Streets of Rage* the same year, which more than filled the void on the Genesis. But I loved *Final Fight* in the arcades, so it was a bit of a bummer to know that it wasn't coming to my console of choice.

In 1994, Sega and Capcom officially announced that Capcom would be supporting the Genesis after years of being exclusive to Nintendo hardware in North America. More specifically, this was to announce that *Street Fighter II* was on the way to Sega's console. But Capcom had a presence on Sega's 16-bitter right from the start. Marquee games such as *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and *Strider* had appeared thanks to licensing agreements between the two companies where Sega itself handled porting and releasing the games at home. And that's exactly the way *Final Fight* finally made it to the Genesis ecosystem in 1994.

What a revelation! While *Final Fight CD* isn't arcade perfect, it's the closest any home version had gotten at the time. Probably the most important bit is that the roster is back up to three fighters here, and that two players can partner up to pound their way through the Mad Gear. The missing level from the SNES game has also been restored, along with a brand-new time attack mode that features all new backgrounds and original music tracks.

Let's talk about the music, because it's awesome. As was often the case in the early '90s, the optical format of the Sega CD allowed Sega and Capcom to rearrange the original *Final Fight* soundtrack to use redbook audio. The remix is the work of T's Music, a collective of musicians credited with a lot of work on games from Hudson, Sega, and others throughout the '90s and early 2000s. Many of the tunes on the Sega CD soundtrack are based entirely on the original arcade composition but sound so much richer here thanks to updated synth and audio samples.

It's likely that a lot of folks who experienced *Final Fight* in its original arcade form didn't hear much of the music anyway (who could concentrate on a soundtrack with dozens of other machines being played around you?). Still, the redbook soundtrack on the Sega CD version is some of the best beat-'em-up music around.

Final Fight CD is a classic. It's simple enough that you feel like a badass from the second you start the game, yet deep enough that familiarizing yourself with one of the characters yields an experience just different enough to feel unique.

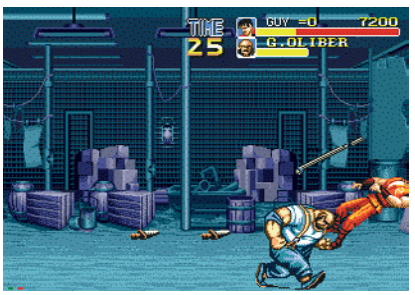
FUN FACT:

Final Fight was originally being developed as a sequel to Street Fighter under the title Street Fighter '89. That doesn't mean this was going to be a one-on-one fighting game though. Final Fight was always being developed as a belt scroller. The Street Fighter name was going to be used based on gamers' supposed familiarity with the original coin-op.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Final Fight is a classic of the genre, and in spite of years of rereleases and compilations, the only place you can play this wonderful version of the game is on the Sega CD.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16



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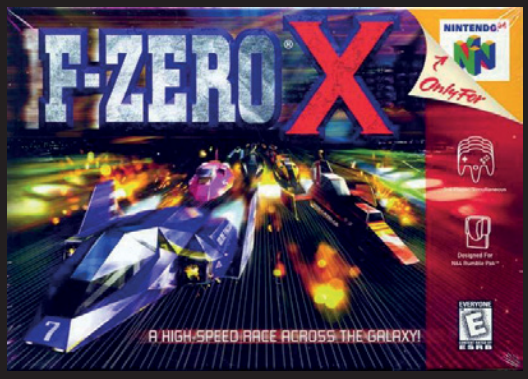
CHAPTER 26

F-ZERO X

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: FUTURISTIC RACING
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1998



F-Zero X may have been released in the same era as other genre titans such as *Mario Kart 64* and *Diddy Kong Racing*, but it has a personality all its own. From the superhero aesthetic of the character designs to the high-speed action of the deadly courses, everything about it oozes a heavy-metal sci-fi theme. The thrashing guitar solo as the N64 logo appears on the screen perfectly sets it up. Nothing can prepare you for the perils that await on these sonic speedways.

F-Zero X's courses are exciting as you fly through them at warp speed. The rush that you'll feel as the psychedelic colors of the tracks and tunnels that whoosh by is mind-melting when accompanied by the heavy-metal soundtrack. The tracks range from linear speedways to winding death traps, tricky half-pipes, and cylinders that magnetize your vehicle for dynamic 360-degree control. This is all wrapped up in a package that requires a bit of mastery to fully appreciate.

While *Mario Kart*, *Wave Race 64*, and various other racing games of the N64 era were relatively easy to pick up and play, *F-Zero X* was a different beast. The cutthroat design of the tracks permeates the gameplay with tight controls and a spin attack stacked on top of lightning-fast, rocket-boosted machines that feel as fast as the game looks. It's business as usual when machines start exploding on the track and go up in smoke around you, since taking your eyes off the road means you'll meet the same fate. This makes multiplayer races feel extra personal. There is no randomness to your offense, and each attack is deliberate and decisive, rewarding you with a satisfying chime and a gold star on your screen, with another awarded after each kill. If you don't die, you'll likely be left with a fireball flying across the track as you work desperately to avoid any obstacle on your way to the recovery zones. The high-stakes feeling of each race is amplified by the Energy Boost mechanic, which trades your vehicles' life for a burst of speed, making abusing it a deadly option.

The gritty aesthetic of the game is expressed not only through the gameplay but the characters as well. They range from heroic to downright menacing. Fan-favorite Captain Falcon heads up a cast of freaky sci-fi racers, each with a unique machine to dominate the racetrack. While the models of the cars and tracks were a bit lacking according to critics at the time, the incredible 60 frames per second with 30 racers per race was hailed as extraordinary. IGN remarked that "the feel of hitting a 'zipper' and jetting right through the middle of a pack of 15 cars is awesome."

The detail truly shines in the sound effects and music, and the wavy voice of the announcer has a charm that is grin-inducing whenever you hear him yell, "Wow, you're way out in front!" If you're ever on the receiving end of vehicular destruction, the rumble pack felt like your controller was turning to rubble just like your vehicle. The attention to little things truly makes the whole package of *F-Zero X* shine bright.

These mechanics and atmosphere build the foundation for a unique approach to the tried-and-true formula for the era. Well-timed speed boosts and knowledge of each track pay off big time in nearly every mode, and the sharp sideswipes you can execute add depth to the split-second hyperspeed races. The emphasis on high-stakes racing is pushed to the forefront in the Death Race mode, an endless race where the goal is to be the last machine standing. This is great

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fun and works well as the battle mode equivalent for the game, making it perfect for multiplayer brawls. The X Cup also showed how devious the game could be, because it randomly generated courses each time you played it, since at times the random designs would cause the CPU racers to fly off the track.

The aggressive nature of the game shines through in nearly every facet. While most games relied on power-ups or elements of the track to keep the perils of racing on the casual and random side, *F-Zero X* was all about the brawls. Any race that had multiple racers allowed for the emergence of rivals who restored energy if you eliminated them. This gives a satisfying sense of momentum to each race and rewards the skilled player for adopting the deadly atmosphere of the game.

Diddy Kong Racing was my favorite racer before this one, since I always favored the mascot kart racer over any other subgenre. *F-Zero X* changed that, since I became obsessed with the high-speed death races with Pico and his Wild Goose, or Bio Rex in Big Fang. It was a tough sell to get friends for multiplayer, since there was no form of random power-up mechanic and most tracks were unforgiving in their design. I had only a handful that would entertain a race or two, with even fewer wanting to get the most out of the game as I had. When we got together, though, only the shredding of the guitars and roars of the boosts could be heard until someone inevitably ate a sideswipe or spin attack to meet their end. Whether it be a straight-up kill or a cheeky nudge off the track, the rage that followed afterward was inevitable since you always knew who your killer was.

The entire package boasts an experience that was much different from anything Nintendo had released up until that point. Everything from the gritty sci-fi aesthetic to the deadly racing atmosphere was a far cry from the colorful worlds of Mario or a Rareware title. It never lost that Nintendo charm, with the memorable tunes from the SNES classic *F-Zero* adapted into guitar-shredding arrangements to match the game's new sense of intensity. Along with some subtle nods to other Nintendo franchises, such as the inclusion of a racer named James McCloud with a particularly familiar-looking vehicle, the experience always feels authentic. Especially since the top three racers get a celebration at the end of each cup, complete with fireworks and a quote from the winner.

While there were a plethora of sci-fi hyperspeed racers on the market, such as *Wipeout* and *Extreme-G*, *F-Zero X* came in with a splash to show the new kids that their roots were still fresh. The performance of the game is stunning, with an emphasis on breakneck speed and hard-core action. While it has a bit of a learning curve, it pays off in spades to master it and get the most out of each race. It's still the biggest *F-Zero* game in the franchise, with 24 tracks in total. The variety added by the X Cup makes the game feel fresh even today.

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FUN FACT:

F-Zero X was the first racing game to run at 60 fps.

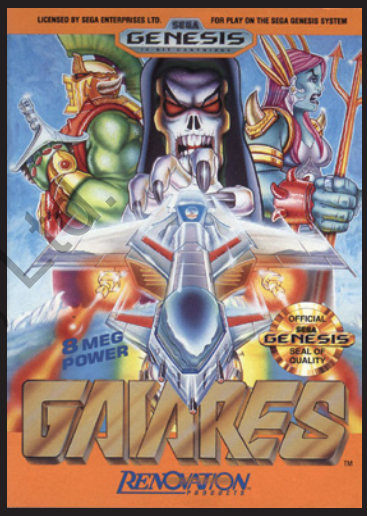
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

F-Zero X is a technical marvel with a soundtrack that defied its limitations. It was unlike anything anyone had seen from Nintendo at that point, with its heavy-metal aesthetic and intense combat racing. Plus, it's just plain FUN.

—Thorne Stone, freelance writer, founder of clusterfuktmedia.com

CHAPTER 27

GAIARES



SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: RENOVATION
DEVELOPER: TELENET
1 PLAYER
1990

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The late 1990s was an amazing time to collect vintage video games. Retro game collecting was still a niche hobby, but I had been collecting for many years at that point. Around once a week or so I would drive around to the various FuncoLand stores in the Dallas / Fort Worth area and buy whatever NES, Genesis, and Super NES games that looked interesting or fun to play. The PlayStation and the Nintendo 64 were the hot systems at the time (the Dreamcast released at the tail end of the decade), and you could buy most games for previous consoles for super cheap.

FuncoLand, which would become GameStop in 2000, was an amazing store with a huge selection from the NES forward. Unlike what would become of GameStop, which eventually dropped retro games and would begin selling way too many nongaming items, FuncoLand was filled to the brim with gaming goodness (as was GameStop for the first few years). FuncoLand stocked boxes for their older games, as well as the manuals. They had room to do this since they were focused purely on video games.

The FuncoLand closest to my house had a huge wall of Sega Genesis games, many of them with boxes and manuals, and this is where I bought my complete copy of *Gaiares* (pronounced "Guy-Are-Us") for just $2.99. I had read in a magazine—probably *Electronic Gaming Monthly*—that *Gaiares* was a kickass side-scrolling shooter with killer weapons, excellent graphics, and super fun and challenging gameplay. Since I was a big fan of side-scrolling shooters dating all the way back to such arcade classics as *Defender* and *Scramble* (both 1981), and since I loved a bargain and collecting mint-in-box games, it was a no-brainer purchase. (Today, a boxed copy of *Gaiares* will set you back around $130–$150. Or $180–$200 if it includes the manual and foldout poster.)

When I brought *Gaiares* home and plugged it into my Genesis later that afternoon, I was not disappointed. Not in the least. I discovered that it was indeed a kickass game with all the attributes ascribed to it by the aforementioned magazine review.

The best side-scrolling shooter on a system that excels in the genre, *Gaiares* takes place in an alternate

future where Mother Earth "has been turned into an environmental wasteland by careless humans." Gulfer, an intergalactic terrorist group, plans to invade Earth and use the pollution as weapons. As ace pilot Dan Dare, you must take the helm of your powerful spacecraft and stop them. Ten minutes of anime cutscenes—unusually lengthy for a cartridge game—tell the story.

Gaiares is brutally difficult, but it never feels overly unfair or cheap like some of the more frustrating shooters, such as those in the "bullet-hell" subgenre. Despite how many times I get destroyed while playing the game, I always feel like if I just would have had faster reflexes or made a smarter move I could have survived. The ship you pilot is nimble and speedy right out of the gate (you can select from three speeds at any time with the A button), the controls are perfectly responsive, the power-ups are a blast to acquire and use (*Gradius* fans will love them), and the action keeps you attentive and engaged every step of the way.

You guide your ship through four distinctive levels: Floating Continent, Glacial Planet, Space Sanctuary, and Space Colony. You'll dodge asteroids and falling stalactites, pass through the tunnel of an iceberg, destroy gun turrets and laser batteries along planet surfaces, blast your way through deadly scenery and the bay doors of giant ships, cruise through space at high speeds (the backgrounds whiz by at times), get tugged at by gravity from a black hole, and pass through a graveyard of robots and spaceships. And, of course, you'll fire away at enemy ships and creatures along the way, including huge, highly detailed bosses, such as a Grim Reaper look-alike and an armor-clad figure with shield and sword in hand. Branching pathways resulting in different obstacles and enemies add to the fun.

Just as your ship is immediately capable of three speeds, it is always equipped with a TOZ intelligence system device, which, at first glance, appears similar to the Force weapon in *R-Type*. However, instead of destroying enemies, it attaches itself to them and "teaches" your ship how to use the weaponry of the enemy in question. Learning the weapon of the same enemy repeatedly increases the power of the weapon. Said weapons include horizontal and vertical lasers, rotating bullets, multidirectional shots and missiles, a plasma cannon, homing lasers, and giga beams, which are thick lasers that launch forward. You can also fire the TOZ at defense items, including a barrier shield and a dimension quake that destroys all on-screen enemies.

The difficulty level is muted somewhat by the powerful weapons and relatively frequent availability of shields, but beating the game is still a tough challenge, thanks in part to the fact that you must make strategic use of weapon choice and speed selection.

John Sczepaniak, writing for Hardcore Gaming 101, explains another reason for the game's difficulty (not to mention its replayability): "Enemy locations and firing patterns are not fixed, but based upon player position, meaning the game constantly adapts and is almost procedurally generated. You can't simply memorize their locations; you need to be ready to adapt with them."

A Genesis/Megadrive exclusive, *Gaiares* was created primarily by programmer Masayasu Yamamoto and graphics and game designer Kouji Yokota. The music is by Shinobu Ogawa.

In *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers: Volume 1* (2014, SMG Szczepaniak), Yokota explains in an interview why the game was created to be super challenging in the first place.

> Yamamoto-san, the programmer, was in charge of the game balance, but it was originally intended for the overseas market. Since there's a tendency to play a game and then sell it, as well as rental systems, the overseas publisher, Renovation, asked us to make the game more difficult so it would not be rented and completed easily. When we went over to show them the demo they said, "You should make it even more difficult!" We started getting concerned at this point, but we complied. So ultimately the game became very difficult.

Even though *Gaiares* has skyrocketed in price over the past couple of decades, I'll never sell my copy. Not only is it a great game that I come back to time and

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again, it's a fun reminder of collecting during the 1990s, when "game chasing" was a cheap hobby that almost always yielded results.

FUN FACT:

Back when Gaiares was new in stores, participating retailers offered a free T-shirt with purchase of the game. That shirt, which shows how to pronounce the game's name—GUY-ARE-US—is very hard to find today.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Gaiares covers all the bases. It's challenging, but not frustrating. It looks and sounds fantastic, thanks to colorfully detailed graphics and a rocking soundtrack. It scrolls smoothly and has excellent controls. And it features an inventive power-up system and incredibly cool weaponry. In short, it's FREAKING AWESOME!

—Brett Weiss

CHAPTER 28

GALAGA '90

TURBOGRAFX-16

GENRE: FIXED-SCREEN SHOOTER / VERTICAL-SCROLLING SHOOTER

PUBLISHER: NEC

DEVELOPER: NAMCO

1 PLAYER

1989

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Unlike with films, it is not uncommon for the quality of video game sequels to surpass their initial series entries, whereas with movies, sequels can often come across as derivative or uninspired cash grabs. While this can certainly happen with video games, the good ones can transform a series in ways that film sequels can only imagine. Video game sequels are often created using more-powerful software than their predecessors, allowing developers to utilize those technological advances to let their imaginations fly.

Galaga, the 1981 arcade sequel to 1979's *Galaxian*, is one notable example of this phenomenon.

While *Galaxian* was a fun game in its own right, *Galaga* took its basic fixed-screen shooter gameplay to the next level. It added features such as capturing your fighters to create a mind-blowing double shot, the nerve-wracking challenge levels, and faster enemy swarms, which added tremendously to the formula. While there was a third game in the series, *Gaplus*, a.k.a. *Galaga 3*, many gamers think of *Galaga '90* as the next game in line.

Namco initially released *Galaga '90* as *Galaga '88* in North American arcades before being renamed for the TurboGrafx-16 port. The game shows off its improved graphics with detailed enemies and

backgrounds, but the gameplay so closely mimics the original *Galaga*'s approach that in some ways it feels more like a remake than a sequel. Everything looks and sounds new and better, but still familiar.

Do you enjoy shooting at space bugs that come at you from above in a variety of formations? Do you get an adrenaline rush when you manage to pull off the double-shot trick by letting your fighter get captured, then freeing it to join you in battle? Do you enjoy blasting hordes of enemies out of the sky in the challenge stages by using your ultraquick reflexes? Check, check, and check. This game contains all of those standard *Galaga* elements.

But what about new enhancements? You can't release the same game with shiny new graphics and expect people to pay hard-earned money to play it. How does this hybrid remake/sequel distinguish itself from the classic? For starters, how about adding new space bug enemies? Your instantly recognizable enemies are there, but fans of the original will quickly recognize new galactic bug nasties that blow up like balloons before being blasted out of the sky.

Another new feature is the inclusion of vertical-scrolling levels interrupted by the standard fixed-screen sections you're used to seeing. This new feature certainly takes you by surprise the first time your ship begins moving as enemies and space rocks surround you. If you make it far enough into the game, you'll be introduced to another new feature: miniboss fights. Boss battles are staples of shooters of the late '80s and beyond, so their inclusion here isn't surprising, but it's still nice to see.

Additionally, you can choose your path in the game by grabbing two blue capsules when they drop from large enemies or obstacles. If you capture two capsules before completing a stage, you can warp to a new level instead of merely progressing forward in a linear path. They act similarly to warp zones found in *Super Mario Bros.*

If you're still not convinced *Galaga '90* has enough bells and whistles to make it stand apart from the original, the final coup is the addition of the mighty triple shot! You can pull this technique off by letting your double-shot fighters get captured. After rescuing them with a reserve fighter, all three are transformed into a large, imposing triple-shot blaster. As you might expect, the larger your fighter, the harder it is to avoid all the enemy shots and bugs barreling down at you. This new feature alone is worth the upgrade. All of these new attributes combined with gorgeous 2-D sprites and original yet familiar-sounding music, and you have a must-own game.

Galaga '90 wasn't released on any of the more successful home-gaming consoles of the era, such as the SNES or the Genesis, so many people missed out on it in North America. I don't recall ever seeing *Galaga '88* in any arcade I visited in the late '80s and early '90s, which is a shame, because it would have been a serious quarter-muncher. The original *Galaga* is my all-time favorite classic arcade game, so an upgraded sequel with impressive visuals and fun, new features would have been huge for me. Unfortunately, two-player beat-'em-ups such as *Double Dragon* and fantastic racing games such as *OutRun* stole the thunder away from this old-school shooter with a new-school aesthetic.

When I finally picked up a used TurboGrafx-16 sometime in the first few years of the 2000s, I quickly recognized the existence of *Galaga '90* after a little research. It kept popping up on "Best Games for the TurboGrafx-16" lists that I was browsing to help me build a small but impactful library of games. My hopes were sky high, but I kept my expectations in check when I thought back to how other examples of "modern" updates to classic arcade games fared. Once I got my copy, I was floored by how much fun I was having. The TurboGrafx controller even does the arcade cabinet one better by giving you the option to toggle on the rapid-fire option, saving you a nasty case of trigger finger. *Galaga '90* exceeded all of my tepid expectations and remains one of my favorite games for the console.

Lucas M. Thomas wrote a glowing review for IGN.com in 2007, stating, "The game is a faithful re[-]creation both of its original arcade form and a worthy upgrade to the established *Galaga* formula—because the foundation's the same, but there's much more to find and achieve. It's *Galaga* with depth."

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In 2001 the Video Game Critic (videogamecritic.com) summed it up best, "*Galaga '90* is so extraordinary that it pretty much justifies buying a whole TurboGrafx-16 system. Not only does *Galaga '90* push the series to new heights, it does so while preserving the classic look, sound, and control that made the original such a winner. *Galaga '90* is a top-notch shooter and an absolute must-have for every TurboGrafx owner."

FUN FACT:

Four distinctly different endings can be earned, depending on how the player performs and which path(s) are taken to reach the game's conclusion.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

A brilliant sequel to the ubiquitous 1981 shooter, Galaga '90 makes a strong case for the best game on the TurboGrafx-16 thanks to impressive enhancements to what was already a classic and insanely fun game.

—Jason Breininger, retro-gaming writer and music podcaster

CHAPTER 29

GATE OF THUNDER

TURBODUO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: HUDSON SOFT
DEVELOPER: RED COMPANY
1 PLAYER
1992

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It's rare to find a game that can elevate itself to elite status on the basis of a single attribute. To really be considered a superior game, it pretty much needs to achieve high marks in every category: gameplay, fun factor, replayability, overall feel, and the like. And then there are the composition elements, such as graphics, sound, music, animation, innovation, and such. In the case of *Gate of Thunder*, if you hypothetically stripped away the music from this game, you'd still have one damn fine game, but it frankly just wouldn't be the same. *Gate of Thunder*'s spectacular soundtrack makes the action spring to life like no other. We'll circle back to that in a moment.

As a side-scrolling shooter, *Gate of Thunder* for NEC's TurboDuo excelled at showcasing the console's technical capabilities. The game served as a pack-in title on a four-in-one CD-ROM disc for the TurboDuo, along with two Bonk titles (*Bonk's Adventure* and *Bonk's Revenge*) and *Bomberman* (a hidden game accessible only via cheat code). While the *Bonk* games and *Bomberman* were all previously available for the TurboGrafx-16, *Gate of Thunder* was exclusively developed for the Duo on NEC's Super CD-ROM2 media platform.

Gate of Thunder is a shooter that falls just slightly short of being considered a "bullet-hell" game. It's

challenging without being obnoxiously punishing, even at its highest difficulty level. As with other side-scrolling shooters such as *Gradius* (Konami, 1985) and *R-Type* (Irem, 1987), you pilot a small, nimble spaceship with various acquirable armaments and resources through several stages while encountering a multitude of enemy types and ultimately facing off against formidable level bosses. You're offered support by a supply craft that will sporadically drop weapons upgrades, shields, and the like. As the story goes, you play as a space policeman named Hawk who is tasked with piloting a spaceship called Hunting Dog in the hopes of thwarting the nefarious General Don Jingi and the Obellon army from stealing a powerful energy source known as Starlight from planet Aries. Pretty standard stuff, really, at least on the surface.

Heavily inspired by *Thunder Force III* (Sega, 1990), *Gate of Thunder* looks and plays wonderfully. Each level presents a unique architecture and motif to keep the game feeling fresh from start to finish. The bosses at each level's conclusion are massive and menacing. There's a distinct feeling of accomplishment whenever you manage to defeat one. Despite being visually and thematically reminiscent of other games in the space shooter genre, *Gate of Thunder* steps up the gameplay by creatively incorporating obstacles that originate from the background scenery, collapsing caves that must be navigated, and even a phase that occurs at a warp speed pace.

NEC is credited with creating the industry's first CD-ROM-based video game medium when their Turbo-CD add-on peripheral to their TurboGrafx-16 console became available to North American gamers in 1989 (1987 for the Turbo-Grafx-16's Japanese and French equivalent, the PC Engine). The TurboDuo was the second and much more powerful version, so *Gate of Thunder* set a high bar for what future disc-based games could achieve.

From the moment the game is fired up, it's obviously something different and exciting. Instead of opening to a typical, boring title screen, *Gate of Thunder* begins with a lengthy, up-tempo, anime-style introduction backed by a remarkable futuristic rock track while the game's story is cinematically unfolded. This sequence lasts approximately three minutes, and the player can simply opt to skip it with the press of a button, though I don't recommend it. Three decades later, that intro is still a blast to view in its entirety.

So let's get back to the music. As I said before, the redbook audio track in *Gate of Thunder* is simply without equal. It's a 1992 game with a musical score that sounds fresh today. And in that regard, the *Gate of Thunder* experience is magnified exponentially. Every track on the disc is stellar. In fact, it almost feels wasted on such a niche title on a relatively obscure console. Here's where the story of *Gate of Thunder*'s soundtrack takes an interesting turn.

Astute observers of *Gate of Thunder*'s end credit roll will notice that the game's sound design is credited to Nick Wood (VGMdb) of Syn Sound Design. Syn Sound Design is also credited as "Presented by," along with Red Company and Hudson Soft. Notably there are other sound production credits, thus creating the presumption that Wood composed *Gate of Thunder*'s soundtrack. The company Syn Sound Design was founded by Nick Wood (producer and arranger), Simon Le Bon of '80s pop rock band Duran Duran, and Simon's wife, Yasmin Le Bon. In true arcade style, Simon's, Yasmin's, and Nick's names would inspire the initials SYN in their company's name. It remains unclear to this day as to how much involvement, if any, Le Bon had in the composition of *Gate of Thunder*'s soundtrack, but it's probably a bit revealing that his name doesn't appear in the game's end credits, while Wood's does. In any case, the connection is interesting and serves to reinforce the high standard of quality behind the game's final product musically.

Lest anyone forget, the TurboGrafx-16 was unfortunately (and arguably undeservedly) in a distant third place during the 16-bit era in terms of sales and overall popularity, though that shouldn't suggest its games were of any lesser quality than its competitors. Additionally, the TurboDuo console was even less common in North American homes. Chalk it up in part to NEC's unfortunate fate of not being a household name like Nintendo, Sega, or even Atari. Thus,

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Gate of Thunder was and still is unknown to many. But even if you never play *Gate of Thunder* (which is a crime unto itself), do yourself a favor and at least listen to it. The game's entire 46-minute score can be found online and is certainly worth your time to check out.

Electronic Gaming Monthly awarded *Gate of Thunder* with "Best Music for a CD Game," and it's almost always mentioned in discussions of great game music. Is this game worth playing? Yes. Is it easy/cheap to find? Not so much. When in doubt, find a good emulator, right? I digress. Back to my original point. While *Gate of Thunder* is certainly an above-average shooter in most elements, it's the music that drives the game way up the charts. And if you're up for even more rock-and-roll shooting, check out *Lords of Thunder* (Turbo Technologies, 1993), the spiritual sequel that was also available on the TurboDuo.

Now go google "gate of thunder soundtrack" and give it a listen. I promise you'll be glad you did.

FUN FACT:

After the game's release, Minori Shobo adapted elements of Gate of Thunder's story line into a manga titled Hudson Makyou that featured various Hudson Soft characters.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The TurboGrafx-16 and TurboDuo consoles are practically synonymous with high-quality shoot-'em-ups such as Side Arms (Capcom, 1989) and Blazing Lazers (Compile, 1989), but Gate of Thunder is the finest of its kind in their respective libraries. Simply put, Gate of Thunder fires on every cylinder that makes a shooter worth playing—it's beautiful to look at, it's a joy to hear, the difficulty curve is scaled perfectly, its handling is surgical, and it's a unique and fun-filled ride. When Electronic Gaming Monthly's editors ranked their choices for greatest console video games of all time in 1997, Gate of Thunder claimed the #53 spot. Classic-games.net rated Gate of Thunder 9/10, claiming it remains one of the best reasons to own a TurboDuo.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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CHAPTER 30

GOLDEN AXE

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1989

When I was a kid, I visited my friend Chris for a week in Marlboro, New Jersey, each summer. We braved the heat while trekking on our bikes to a minimall where we would rent a movie, grab junk food, and pick up Pop Rocks at Party City. What made the summer of '89 stand out was discovering a *Golden Axe* arcade machine in the corner of a grocery store.

That afternoon we strengthened our brotherhood bond as we rode fire-breathing dragons, cast magic spells, and beat up baddies. It was totally immersive:

the water splashing on the shore, the clouds blowing in the wind, the satisfying clunk of hitting a henchman on the noggin with the blunt of my weapon's handle. It was more than a game—it was a visually engaging adventure. Shoulder to shoulder with our hands on the joysticks, we cooperatively navigated our mighty warriors across the treacherous war-torn fantasy world. We battled giants and skeleton swordsmen and chased pint-sized thieves while a catchy cinematic score pulsed through our veins.

When I returned home I searched high and low for the arcade cabinet, but to no avail. Little did I know that in just a few months I'd be able to play a near-perfect port in the comfort of my own house.

A day before Christmas Eve in December 1989, my best friend Paul casually said, "That arcade game you were talking about is out now at Toys 'R' Us." Paul had unknowingly set off a spark. I felt a sense of urgency. I had been reliving the gameplay in my head for months, and I simply had to have it, like, right now. Unfortunately, with such short notice my pockets were empty, and Toys "R" Us was across state lines. I had to do something! In a split-second decision, I offered Paul my favorite Yamaha keyboard for $60. I loved the keyboard, and it was a gift from my grandfather—terrible, right?

If anyone was going to help me out, it would be Paul. In an era of Sega versus Nintendo, Paul was the biggest Sega aficionado I've ever met. Paul not only graciously accepted my offer, but his father was happy to drive us there. I rushed through the toy store with a grab-and-go mentality—no time to look at other games.

Golden Axe was one of the best coin-op ports I've ever seen. It was exactly how I remembered the game I had played with Chris, from the tight, responsive controls to the smooth-shaded graphics. *Computer and Video Games Magazine* (#101, April 1990) proclaimed, "Incredible! What we have here is the equivalent of a *Golden Axe* arcade machine in a cartridge!"

Sega's magazine ads boasted, "We bring the arcade experience home." And that they did. The home version seemed even better than the arcade, since it included practice options, two extra levels, variable difficulty levels, and music and sound effect tests. Controller in hand and audio piped through my stereo system, I was once again transported into a battle of epic proportions, but this time I could journey onward without fear of running out of quarters. I found myself in awe all over again. I proudly looked over at my friend Paul and said, "See! This is what I was talking about!"

Makoto Uchida brought this fantastic world to life. Sega executives saw the tremendous success of Technos' groundbreaking side-scrolling beat-'em-up *Double Dragon* and wanted a similar arcade game. They approached Uchida following the prior success with his mythology-inspired brawler, *Altered Beast*.

In Keith Stuart's book *Sega Mega Drive / Genesis: Collected Works* (2014, Read-Only Memory), Uchida recalled, "We spent an incredibly long time researching *Double Dragon*. We were looking at how to control the feel of play and learning about enemy AI."

But Uchida gave his new creation a unique twist; the clichéd murky back-alley urban setting was gone and replaced with an ambitious medieval environment filled with sword and sorcery. He found inspiration in literary works such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, researched the erotic fantasy art of Boris Vallejo, collected illustrations based on Middle-earth's fantastical worlds, and studied *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Golden Axe takes place in Yuria, a once-peaceful land taken over by a tyrannical dictator named Death Adder. The Genesis game's manual reads, "Death Adder's soldiers have invaded every village. And Death Adder himself has massacred thousands. Finally, he's kidnapped the King and his daughter, the Princess, and seized the Golden Axe."

One or two players choose between three revenge-seeking heroes who set out to restore peace to the kingdom. There's the fearless Tyris-Flare, a Boris Vallejo–influenced, scantily clad Amazon woman equipped with a sword. Jumping right out of the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* is Gilius-Thunderhead, a long-bearded, ax-wielding, horned-head-butting dwarf. Last is the lead hero, first name Ax, last name Battler; a loin-cloth-wearing Conan-like barbarian who "heard his mother's final screams and won't rest until he hears Death Adder's." Despite his namesake, Ax Battler's weapon is a long sword, even though he's gripping a massive shiny silver axe on the box art.

As you guide your character along, hacking and slashing, you'll quickly discover villains riding on the backs of Death Adder's beasts, the Bizarrians. In glorious *Grand Theft Auto* style you can knock them off, steal their ride, and utilize their powers. The first Bizarrian you encounter is the famed Chicken Leg, a pink tail-whipping cockatrice who previously appeared in *Altered Beast*.

Impressive as the combat was, my favorite element was the mechanic of casting magic spells, often filling the screen with astonishing imagery. You obtain magic potions by hitting or nudging nonhostile blue elves. They are cute, fast, and tricky, but when you strike one

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they drop a magic pot from their sack. Each collected pot gives the player one bar of magic. The magnitude of your magic power is determined by the number of bars you have available. Tyris-Flare possesses the most-powerful spells, including the summoning of an awe-inspiring, flame-spewing giant dragon.

The Genesis port seemed arcade perfect at first, although there are differences. Instead of remaining on screen, bodies disappear after you kill them. The loss of screams and sounds that were digitized from classic '80s films such as *Conan the Barbarian*, *First Blood*, *An American Werewolf in London*, and *Commando* was disappointing. The humorous arcade ending where the characters blast out of the arcade cabinet and into the real world was gone, and the violence was toned down. Baddies lost interest in kicking helpless townspeople on the ground. Death Adder no longer resurrected from a pile of corpses and snakes. Where was the blood spraying from the Golden Axe embedded in his chest upon defeat?

But don't worry; Tyris-Flare makes up for this by turning up the sex! Surprisingly, she decided to completely expose her buttocks in the ordinarily family-friendly console version by wearing a thong rather than her familiar bikini bottoms. I suspect alcohol may have been involved in this decision. The end credits include a list of characters, many of whom have names suspiciously resembling adult beverages, brands, and ingredients, such as Heninger (Henninger Beer), Sergeant Malt, Sergeant Hop, Colonel Bitter, and more.

Although the Genesis port reigns supreme, *Golden Axe* was released on other platforms with varying results, including the Atari ST, WonderSwan, Amiga, and ZX Spectrum. Gamers "axed" for more and they got it! Sequels, remakes, and spin-offs launched one of Sega's most successful franchises and served as a blueprint for games to follow. We've seen the cast of characters become action figures and appear in comic books, a novel, and other video games such as *Alien Storm*, *Sega Superstars Tennis*, and *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*. *Golden Axe* was added to Arcade1Up's home arcade cabinet lineup and also included my favorite sequel, *Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder*. Indeed, *Golden Axe*'s legacy shows no sign of slowing down.

The Genesis was in its infancy when *Golden Axe* was released. The home console world was transitioning from 8 to 16 bit, and *Golden Axe* helped usher in the dawn of a new era. That Christmas I was so immersed in reliving my arcade experience in my own home that I didn't even realize the '80s were ending. It was a new year, a new decade, and *Golden Axe* was my ticket to the '90s.

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FUN FACT:

Although the English text reads "Golden Axe," the Japanese characters on the main screen translate to the original title, "Battle Axe." There is also a sword, hammer, and axe hidden in the logo.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Golden Axe is a timeless classic with fantasy elements and a level of perfection that set the bar high as one of the first—and best—beat-'em-ups for a 16-bit console.

—Sean Tiedeman, director of The King of Arcades

CHAPTER 31

GOLDENEYE 007

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RARE, LTD.
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1997

From the moment you hit the power button you know *GoldenEye 007* is special. Before a single corporate logo appears on screen, you are presented with an official-looking splash screen parodying the classic British Board of Film Classification ratings slide typically seen before theatrical presentations. It's a simple touch, but it shows just the right amount of class before the gloves come off. There's a crash of cymbals and a hint of brass as slickly rendered Nintendo and Rare logos appear, before a hard-rock interpretation of the classic 007 anthem announces things are about to get real. Limited cartridge memory might mean no fancy full-motion video intro, but *GoldenEye 007* has no need for such gimmicks. Re-creating the classic James Bond rifled barrel shot, the short and sweet intro is perfectly on point for a game that is the ultimate cocktail of secret-agent action and style: shaken, not stirred.

I didn't know what to make of *GoldenEye 007* as I followed its development in magazines such as *Nintendo Power* and *GamePro* before the Nintendo 64's launch. Movie-based video games had a bad reputation for being cheap cash grabs, so I wasn't hyped for it until I finally saw it in person on a demo kiosk in a Blockbuster Video store. I rented it only once before buying a copy of my own at Toys "R" Us the same day I had to return the rental. It was an amazing first-person shooter with incredible gameplay and genuinely deep mechanics that did a great job of re-creating the film it was based on, completely defying my expectations.

That said, I will forever identify this game with one of the best friends I ever had. He had a rough home life and actually ended up living with my family the last couple of years of high school. It was like having a slumber party every night, and we played an unholy amount of *GoldenEye 007*. The game became my friend's release from his troubles and a coping mechanism. We spent countless long nights playing it, obsessively speed-running every level to unlock all the cheats and multiplayer maps and characters, and perfecting our secret-agent techniques, such as planting remote mines on body armor pickups (ruthless, I know).

It's only fitting that an amazing James Bond game should be developed by such a renowned British studio as Rare, Ltd. Based on the 1995 movie *GoldenEye* (the 17th film in the James Bond franchise), the game's development started that same year shortly after the release of Rare's *Killer Instinct* arcade title. Working with a surprisingly modest budget of around $2 million, *GoldenEye 007*'s development team of 11 full-time developers, led by game director Martin Hollis, was relatively inexperienced but took the challenges of developing for the notoriously complex Nintendo 64 head-on before the console's hardware specs were even finalized. They employed Silicon Graphics Onyx workstations, similar to what Rare had been using for prerendered CGI graphics in previous games such as *Donkey Kong Country* and *Killer Instinct*.

GoldenEye 007's first-person shooter design was initially heavily influenced by Sega's *Virtua Cop* arcade game, evident in the game's toggled targeting mode and crouching mechanics, with "on-rails" level designs actually considered early in development. Thanks to the influence of id Software's *DOOM*, though, Rare went with a much more nonlinear approach to level design. Most of the game's 3-D environments were actually constructed as reproductions of real-world spaces, with an emphasis on practical layouts and architecture.

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Game design was then layered on top of the preexisting environments after the fact, allowing the developers to create levels with multiple paths and solutions, almost becoming playgrounds for the game's fluid, fast-paced combat and innovative stealth mechanics (avoiding/eliminating surveillance systems, monitoring noise levels, etc.). This also made adapting the single-player levels into multiplayer arenas a much more straightforward process. Programmer Steve Ellies developed the game's generation-defining multiplayer mode during the final six months of development, with most of the team spending their nights and weekends play-testing relentlessly. After two and a half years of development time, the cartridge was finally released to near-universal acclaim on August 25, 1997.

GoldenEye 007's single-player campaign closely follows the plot of the movie. James Bond is on a mission to tie up loose ends from the Cold War with Soviet relics and double agents, traveling across Russia from a top-secret satellite base in Siberia to a harrowing car chase with a tank through downtown Moscow, and eventually to a hidden nuclear weapons facility in Cuba, where he must confront a longtime friend turned traitor to prevent a global catastrophe. The game's visually detailed levels are excellent re-creations of the film's various locations and sets, capturing its look and feel in a way never really achieved in a movie-based game up to that point.

Using 007's wristwatch as the in-game UI for menus and health gauge was a stroke of genius that seriously enhances the sense of being James Bond, really nailing the gadget aspect of the secret-agent fantasy. The visual effects are also impressive, with nicely animated explosions and smoke, muzzle flashes, and all manner of small bits of polish, such as bullet holes that smolder for a moment after impact. The various animations for enemy characters are well done too, with location-specific hurt reactions and death animations that are entertaining and also provide meaningful feedback to the player.

The character models themselves, unfortunately, are where a great deal of optimization was required to ensure the game's phenomenal four-player, split-screen, multiplayer mode ran well (nearly every character in the single-player game is playable in multiplayer). While the faces of the main characters are indeed texture-mapped with the likenesses of Pierce Brosnan, Sean Bean, and other stars (even classic Bond villains such as Jaws and Oddjob are playable in multiplayer), the character polygon counts and texture resolution aren't exactly the best the system has to offer, but they get the job done.

The audio actually outshines the visuals, with outstanding ambient sounds, gunfire, and explosion effects throughout, though the cartridge's limited memory capacity does mean there are virtually no voices in the game. *GoldenEye 007*'s soundtrack, primarily composed by Rare veterans Graeme Norgate (*Blast Corps*) and Grant Kirkhope (*Donkey Kong Country 2*), is an electronic reimagining of classic Bond themes that is both iconic and modern. It mixes MIDI brass and rock guitars and ranks among the best the Nintendo 64 has to offer.

Fully embracing the N64's unique controller, the intuitive play control and straightforward setup make it a breeze to get into. Playing through the single-player campaign is training for multiplayer, rewarding gamers by unlocking bonus characters and various cheat modes. "DK" mode gives all the characters gigantic heads and arms, parodying the simian characters of the *Donkey Kong Country* games, and the "paintball" mode is actually a tongue-in-cheek jab at Nintendo's then fairly strict policies on violence in games.

With more than eight million copies sold and grossing more than $250 million in revenue worldwide, *GoldenEye 007* is the third-bestselling Nintendo 64 cartridge of all time according to the Entertainment Software Association. The game was awarded the prestigious BAFTA "Game of the Year" award in 1998 and received several awards from the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, including "Interactive Title of the Year" and "Console Game of the Year."

Despite its popularity and commercial success, licensing issues between various copyright holders have prevented any legitimate rereleases of the game. Ultimately, though, *GoldenEye 007* will always be remembered for the way its multiplayer content reshaped console gaming at large. The incredible depth and variety offered through the game's customization settings and cheat options in multiplayer, though, is something that few games since have come close to achieving, and gives *GoldenEye 007* limitless replay value that has immortalized it as one of the crown jewels of the Nintendo 64 library and one of the greatest titles of a generation.

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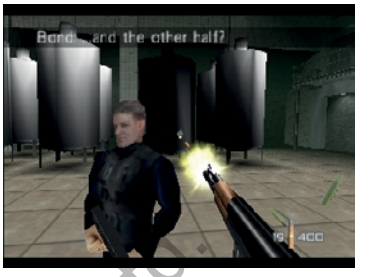
FUN FACT:

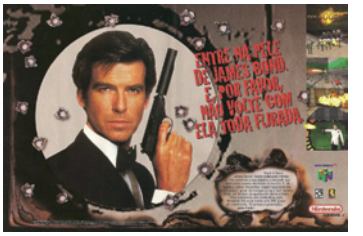
Rare originally created character models of all four actors to have portrayed James Bond up to GoldenEye's release—Sean Connery, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, and Pierce Brosnan—for the game's multiplayer mode, but Sean Connery declined to license his likeness for the game. The additional character models were ultimately disabled for the shipped version of the game, but the finished art assets are actually still stored intact on the game cartridge!

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Every bit as suave and sophisticated as James Bond himself, GoldenEye 007 proved first-person shooters could thrive on home systems, redefining what was possible for multiplayer console games in the process.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist





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CHAPTER 32

GRAN TURISMO

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: SPORTS CAR RACING/SIMULATION
PUBLISHER: SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: POLYPHONY DIGITAL INC.
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1998

Great games are immersive. Great games make you a part of the world they've created. When a game is based on reality, this could be relatively easy or extremely difficult. In the case of *Gran Turismo*, if you're a gearhead, the game is a dream come true. With more than 150 cars from Toyota, Honda, Dodge, Aston Martin, and Chevrolet—among them sexy imports and even the Dodge Viper—car nuts will easily get hooked. Even those who aren't fans of racing games owe it to themselves to jump into the driver's seat of this gem.

The sheer depth of cars in the game is enough to make it legendary, but what made *Gran Turismo* so special was that every car was unique, and through a bevy of customization options and a lengthy GT World Cup mode, you could turn basically any car into something special. What this did, through sheer trial and error, was teach you the ins and outs of automobiles—what mattered, brakes, horsepower, etc.—and give you better equipment on the basis of how you performed. At first, most people go right for the horsepower, believing that a faster car is automatically a better car. They do this not understanding that they can't play the game well enough to control a super-quick car. From there, they'll polish their skills in the arcade mode and even play with friends and get better—good enough to advance in the Cup mode and buy all the sexy cars and set them up the way they want.

See what just happened here? *Gran Turismo*, at its heart, is an adventure game. It just uses racing as its vehicle (pun intended). The end result of all these different elements working together is a racer that can be played in a variety of ways. Let's get something clear: most racing games in 1998 could not be played with this much functionality. In 2022, racing games have far more customization options, and they are still comparable to those in the original *Gran Turismo*. Make no mistake—*Gran Turismo* is a trailblazer. Say whatever you want about *Need for Speed*, *Ridge Racer*, *Daytona USA*, or *Test Drive*, or any other classic or current racing franchise. None have the staying power combined with the sheer excellence of *Gran Turismo*. Add in an excellent soundtrack and dual analog support, and it was everything a next-generation PlayStation racing game should have been and more.

If that was the majority of what *Gran Turismo* represented it would be a classic, but there's even more under the game's hood. A lot more. The average person who experienced *Gran Turismo* when it was first released didn't originally play it for its ton of modes or gameplay depth. That was something they discovered after a few laps. Initially, they played *Gran Turismo* because it looked phenomenal. The ads on TV and in video game magazines sold the game hard. People needed to see how great it looked in person. Upon release, it didn't disappoint. It's kind of funny how it all happened, though. Sony had no idea what they were getting when it was originally pitched to them. They say first impressions mean everything, and the game certainly made an impression with Sony when they first saw it. Sony's Brian Wiklem told me this when I interviewed him for my book *The Minds Behind PlayStation Games*:

> We had a meeting with Kazunori Yamauchi, who came in, and Darren and I were really excited.

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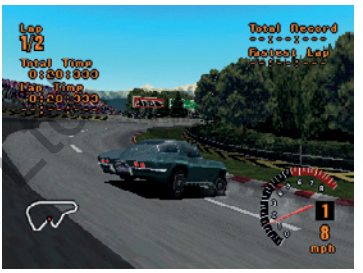
Kazunori was beaming, so excited to show us his new game. It was the prototype for *Gran Turismo*. Darren (Yager) and I responded, "This is great, but where's *Motor Toon Grand Prix 3*?"

Sony didn't know it yet, but the Motor Toon Grand Prix franchise was dead. A new era in Sony racing games was about to change the industry forever. While the original intention for Wiklem that day was to meet the team behind the original *Cool Boarders*, it ended up being remembered for something completely different—the birth of *Gran Turismo*. That's how much of an impression *Gran Turismo* and Yamauchi made that day. It was a defining moment in his career and the beginning of a new era. To go from *Motor Toon Racing*, which was a game that played wonderfully but was far from a huge seller, to *Gran Turismo* was the right move for Yamauchi (whose other work consists of several forgotten gems including *Tourist Trophy: The Real Riding Simulator*, *Skyblazer*, and *Omega Boost*), and one that changed his career trajectory entirely. Trading in the cartoony visuals and story for something the public could truly connect to, he ultimately developed one of the most iconic franchises in PlayStation history.



Let's be honest here—can you imagine a PlayStation home console without a version of *Gran Turismo* on it? Fast forward nearly 25 years later and 10.85 million units sold on the original and tens of millions more on a handful of sequels. It's easy to say that *Gran Turismo* is one of the reasons why Sony and their line of PlayStation consoles are still going strong today.

FUN FACT:

With nearly 11 million units sold, Gran Turismo is the bestselling racing game on the original PlayStation.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Featuring visuals that hold up today and a level of realism and authenticity that holds its own with any modern racer, Gran Turismo is a timeless classic.

—Patrick Hickey Jr., author of The Minds Behind the Games book series

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CHAPTER 33

THE GUARDIAN LEGEND

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: VERTICAL-SCROLLING SHOOTER / ADVENTURE
PUBLISHER: BRODERBUND
DEVELOPER: COMPILE
1 Player
1989

Modern gaming genres are far more intertwined now than they were 30-plus years ago. You can find traits of older and disparate genres strategically combined with new elements in almost every modern game on the market. The origins of these genres, however, were more rigid, usually conforming to (or not veering far from) a certain play style. After all, the genres were just finding their footing as the 8-bit era introduced the world to the genres that built modern gaming. As they grew more comfortable within said genres, some developers pushed beyond single-minded game design and mixed things up a bit.

Enter *The Guardian Legend*, a game that utilizes multiple genres for a highly compelling experience. The hub of the game takes place in a *Legend of Zelda*–style overworld where you defeat enemies and acquire experience and power-ups. As with most RPGs, you can level up your character. Once you get enough points to level up, your health increases and refills, sometimes providing that last-minute advantage. You can utilize the power-ups in the adventure areas, but their main purpose is in the vertical-shooter sections of the game, which I'll get to in a bit.

In the labyrinthine space station, you, as an intrepid female named Miria, walk through corridors and dungeons, shooting aliens (with names such as Eyegore and Clawbot), finding and using keys to enter rooms, and shooting blocks to reveal paths and items. A grid map you can bring up with the select button helps you keep track of things. You can kill minibosses with your basic gun, but it is easier if you use your special weapons. You fire your main weapon with the A button, while B will fire whatever special weapon you have selected from the options menu. You obtain special weapons by finding them scattered throughout the areas and by defeating bosses. As with *Mega Man*, the special weapons have a specific amount of energy that can be used before they are depleted. Here, though, the energy is shared between the special weapons. You can find upgrades for the special-weapons energy, and from all my playthroughs of the game, finding energy refills was never a problem.

As you traverse the space station, you will come across hatches that let you go into the caverns and corridors below and transform into a ship. Here you fly vertically through each lengthy area, shooting and avoiding waves of alien ships, space rocks, and other enemies until you reach the end boss. Again, the weapons you collected from the overworld work a lot like those in *Mega Man*. Each has a boss they are strong against. If you have the right weapon for the job, then the boss can be easily killed. Using the energy for the special weapons does come at a price. When you have full energy and an upgraded standard gun, it will give your gun full power. If you use the energy, it will also lower your weapon's strength as you use it, making it harder to kill enemies until you refill your energy. If you lose all your energy, you can't fire your special weapons, and you'll have to try to finish the boss with only your starter gun. Weapons include multibullets, backfire, area blaster, repeller (spinning bullets), wave attack, bullet shield, enemy eraser, grenades, fireballs, and lasers (hyper, cutter, and saber).

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The music and sound effects in this game are as memorable as the likes of a *Zelda*, *Mario*, or even *DuckTales* game. Each of the major areas in the space station uses a single song. As you wander the areas, the music is broken up by the sub-bosses that hide in parts of the labyrinth. The vertical-shooter sections have their own selections of songs, as well as their own unique boss themes.

As far as negatives in *The Guardian Legend* go, they are few and far between. Sure, the enemies repeat throughout the game (you can't fool us with swapped color pallets, Compile), and this is especially apparent when you fight the same bosses multiple times, but this was a common occurrence during the era. Slowdown and screen flicker rear their ugly heads when the pace of the game picks up, especially when you are attacked by numerous enemies at once. While good, the music can feel repetitive, but if you take a break from the action periodically you'll refresh your ears and, one hopes, enjoy that glorious 8-bit soundtrack. There's no excusing, however, the 32-character password!

Contemporaneous reviews for the game were largely mixed to positive, as this excerpt from the January 1990 issue of *Video Games & Computer Entertainment* illustrates:

> *The Guardian Legend* is basically a rehash of two or three unoriginal game concepts. However, it's not easy to be subtle about incorporating multiple themes into a single game, and the results are pretty good. Try before you buy, if possible, because this one's not for all tastes—but with most new releases retailing in the $40–$60 range, that rule should apply to all games.

The quartet of reviewers at *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (September 1989) graded the game ranging from a 5 to a 7 out of 10 on their scale, with one reviewer stating, "*Guardian Legend* is similar to *Zanac* but is really two games in one. The maze scenes aren't hard, but they are long. The flying sequences are also easy, with all of the difficulty wrapped up into the boss confrontations. The game does do a good job of bringing the two separate game themes together."

In more-recent years the game has enjoyed largely universal praise. IGN (www.ign.com) ranked it #87 on their top 100 NES games list, putting it ahead of such classics as *Mega Man 4*, *Little Samson*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Popular YouTuber SNES Drunk called it a "really impressive title and easily a top-20 NES game of all time."

FUN FACT:

The North American box art for The Guardian Legend is an almost exact replica of the poster for the 1985 horror movie Creature. If you enter TGL in the password screen, you can play the game as a vertical shooter only.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

While The Guardian Legend is often overlooked in favor of more-popular titles and franchises, the game does a great job of seamlessly combining varied elements of play, including vertical shooting action, multiple weapons options, leveling up the weapons, and a Legend of Zeldaesque overworld.

—Zoe Howard, cocreator of Retro Gamer Girls, author of November's End and The Hunters Realm

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CHAPTER 34

GUNSTAR HEROES

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: TREASURE
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (simultaneous)
1993

A game that many Genesis fans call an anime-inspired take on the *Contra* formula, *Gunstar Heroes* is one of the most dynamic, most exciting experiences I've ever had playing a video game. Yes, it does have many of the *Contra*-style elements that platform shooter fans enjoy—hard-core action, rapid-fire shooting, and tons of enemies to take down—but it offers so much more than a game like, say, *Midnight Resistance* for the Genesis, which is fun but suffers from slowdown and simply doesn't kick as much ass or have as much versatility as *Gunstar Heroes*.

The game puts you in the role of one of the two Gunstar twins, who are determined to return peace and tranquility to formerly peaceful Gunstar 9, which is being menaced by a vicious dictator named Colonel Red. The despot kidnapped the twins' older brother, forced him to reveal the location of the four Mystic Gems, and turned Gunstar 9's worker droids into deadly enemies. To prevent Red from reactivating Golden Silver, who years ago sucked Gunstar 9 dry of all its resources, you must brave seven intense and inventive levels of constant action.

The Gunstar character you control looks cool—sort of like a typical NES action protagonist but more nicely rendered—and is super diverse. In addition to the expected running, jumping, climbing, ducking, and shooting, you can perform such attacks as sliding tackle, body slam, flying kick, and dropkick. You can assume a defensive pose to ward off some enemy attacks, and you can grab and throw enemies. You can even throw your twin brother, which is a useful tactic, but be careful, since it's sometimes easy to do so unintentionally when you guys are close together.

During setup, you pick your character—Gunstar Red can shoot while moving, but Gunstar Blue must stop to shoot. You also select your starting stage as well as difficulty level: easy, normal, hard, or expert. The easy mode will challenge most gamers, but without the frustration factor of many of these types of games. Finally, you can select the type of weapon you want to begin the game with: Force, which shoots a beam of plasma energy; Lightning, which fires a stream of electricity; Chaser, which are laser darts that seek out and destroy multiple targets; and Fire, which is a close-range flamethrower similar to the one you wield in *Contra*.

You can carry only two of the four weapons at a time, but you can combine any two weapons to make a higher-powered weapon, including rapid-fire lightning, chaser force beam, exploding fireball, double fireball, chaser fireball, lightning saber, ultra flamethrower, chaser lightning, star chaser, and mega-bolt. These upgraded weapons are fun to use and are super helpful in beating the game, which is doable thanks in part to unlimited continues and plenty of "vitality."

What is vitality in reference to this game, you may be wondering? Your Gunstar hero starts with 100 points of vitality instead of a life bar. Getting hit by an enemy or other impediment, such as an obstacle or enemy gunfire, reduces your vitality, and this will happen A LOT, since you are constantly attacked. However, you can raise it by grabbing vitality-up items that you collect by shooting boxes, machines, robots, or electronic ducks. You can also find the items simply lying around. Bosses, including an awesome giant robot that chases you, have vitality points as well, and it's fun to watch their vitality decrease as you work to destroy them.

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In two-player mode, if your defeated partner rejoins the fight, one-half of your vitality will transfer to the other Gunstar hero. Speaking of the two-player mode, I prefer it here over *Contra* because in *Contra* the second player drags me down and disrupts the flow of the game, especially if he or she isn't as skilled as I am. (Your mileage may vary, since I've heard plenty of people say that a second player makes *Contra* easier for them to beat.)

As with *Truxton*, *Thunder Force III*, *Shinobi III*, and several other highly acclaimed Genesis titles, I got my copy of *Gunstar Heroes* back in the late 1990s at FuncoLand for super cheap. I had read in various magazines that it was a great game, so when I saw a boxed copy with manual in excellent condition going for just $2.99, I immediately grabbed it off the shelf. This was before retro games were considered collector's items or hot commodities, or however you want to say it.

When I got the game home—I was still living with my parents at the time—I took it to my room, plugged it into my Genny, fired it up, and didn't come up for air for at least a couple of hours. I was spellbound by the dynamic action, the fast shooting, and the cool enemies. Mechanical arms reached out to grab me. I jumped up a series of steps until I reached the top of a pyramid, only to face a boss made of blocks, and then I slid down the other side of the pyramid, shooting as I went. I rode a cart alongside a train, where enemies that were aboard said train fired at me. I love shoot-'em-ups, so the side-scrolling shooter action where you pilot a spaceship was a welcome diversion from all the platforming.

Certain sections of the game reminded me of *Battletoads* for the NES as I went up and down vertically scrolling levels, shooting and jumping over enemies while avoiding electric shocks. There were upward-scrolling levels where I continued jumping up to platforms to progress, and that seemed easy enough until the action suddenly sped up. I battled enemies while atop a moving aircraft. At various points in the game the screen would shake for dramatic effect when the action got especially intense. The game has a sense of humor as well—a tiny boss-type character with super strength hurled me across the screen. And what is up with the board game level!? You roll a large die to progress on the spaces and enter ministages where you'll collect items and battle crazy bosses.

In an interview published on shmuplations.com, *Gunstar Heroes* character designer Tetsuhiko Kikuchi spoke about his favorite part of the game, the pink lobster boss fight from stage 7:

> When we were working on *Gunstar Heroes* the Megadrive game *Mazin Saga* had just been released, and I thought it was amazing. It inspired me to try designing the enemy patterns not with simple mathematical algorithms, but with data I inputted manually by hand. Pink Lobster and other enemies I made were the end result of my experiments with that method. I also love the outer space background in that fight. It's the most beautiful scene in the game.

And holy cow does *Gunstar Heroes* look and sound fantastic—even better than the *Sonic the Hedgehog* trilogy. It's cartoonish, but cool. It's comical, but hard core. Gaming historian and author Ken Horowitz, writing for www.sega-16.com, summed up the aesthetics of the game well:

> *Gunstar Heroes* turned heads in 1993 because of its incredible graphics effects. . . . Scaling, rotation (the heli-plane boss must be seen to be believed), and tons of multi-jointed bosses will leave your jaw bolted to the floor until the credits roll . . . how Treasure was able to make the system jump through so many hoops with such little memory still makes me scratch my head. . . . The eye candy budget wasn't all spent in the special effects department. The graphics themselves are excellent, with tons of parallax and a huge color palate. Everything is detailed and well-animated; more proof as to why Treasure knew the Genesis better than anyone save Sega themselves. All the stages have something unique to them and are superbly designed . . . a game you'll want to play through a stereo system. Booming bass and a rockin' soundtrack complement the action perfectly. Explosions are loud and thunderous, and the brothers' furious yell as they hurl their foes really pumps you up.

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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FUN FACT:

Gunstar Heroes was originally packaged with a Fruit Roll-Ups sample. Asterix and the Great Rescue, Landstalker, and ToeJam & Earl: Panic on Funkotron also included a sample of the popular candy.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Gunstar Heroes looks and sounds as good as any game of its era. It's also one of the wildest, craziest, most-action-packed games ever released for any console.

—Brett Weiss

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CHAPTER 35

THE KING OF FIGHTERS '94

NEO GEO
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: SNK
DEVELOPER: SNK
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

Fighting games were everywhere during the 1990s. The genre arose from the ashes of earlier arcade fighting entries such as *Karate Champ* (Data East, 1984) and *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987), but with greater success due to the dawn of '90s technology and lessons learned. This new era of fighting games would go on to dominate in the arcades before eventually introducing virtual brawling to 16-bit home consoles. The most prevalent and iconic titles of this refreshed style of gameplay were, of course, the *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992) franchises. That dynamic duo was followed by exemplary fighting games from SNK, the likes of *Art of Fighting*, *Fatal Fury*, and *Samurai Shodown*.

As ubiquitous as the genre was, most of the games were similar at their core, filled with colorful characters, one-on-one matches, and over-the-top fighting moves. While certain game publishers were content to stick with this formula, SNK had other plans with *The King of Fighters '94*. The game took the one-on-one format and reforged it into team-based competition. Instead of just selecting one combatant, the game lets you assemble a team of three, with the second and third fighters entering the ruckus after the previous combatant is defeated. This setup meant that you'll need to learn the moves for three fighters instead of just one, giving matches variety, depth, and quite a bit of forethought when assembling one's team.

SNK's other breakthrough concept for the game was to introduce fighters from other SNK franchises, including *Art of Fighting* (Robert Garcia, Ryo Sakazaki, Takuma Sakazaki, Yuri Sakazaki, and King), *Fatal Fury* (Andy Bogard, Terry Bogard, Joe Higashi, Kim Kaphwan, and Mai Shiranui), *Ikari Warriors* (Ralf Jones, Clark Steel, and Heidern), and *Psycho Soldier* (Athena Asamiya and Sie Kensou). There are new fighters as well, including Kyo Kusanagi, Benimaru Nikaido, and Goro Daimon. This cross-franchise concept would eventually pave the way for future fighting game franchises such as Namco's *Soul Calibur*, Nintendo's *Smash Bros.*, and even future *Mortal Kombat* releases.

While *King of Fighters '94* proved popular with its core fans, it wasn't available at my local arcades when it debuted. And I wasn't about to purchase the painfully expensive Neo Geo home console. As such, I didn't experience the series until the game's first follow-up, *The King of Fighters '95*, was ported to the Sony PlayStation in 1996. That game quickly became a favorite among my group of friends. Perhaps the best thing I can say about the game is that none of us were big SNK fans, but we loved *The King of Fighters '95*—high praise, indeed!

In 1998, I finally got my hands on my own Neo Geo CD console and a copy of *The King of Fighters '94*. I was not disappointed, as the nostalgia and amusement surged back from years past. Better late than never, but the CD-based version of the game is essentially identical to the original arcade release, so I was thrilled to finally have it as part of my collection.

To get some perspective from a man who experienced *The King of Fighters '94* when it first came out, I spoke with Brian Lesyk, host of the *Pass The Controller* podcast.

"I played *King of Fighters '94* when it debuted in North American arcades back in October of 1994," he

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said. "Like other Neo Geo MVS arcade titles, the game was also available for the Neo Geo AES home console, but being as I was a freshman in college with limited financial means at the time, playing at home—or in the dormitory, as it were—simply wasn't an option."

Lesyk went on to say, "I was already a huge fan of other Neo Geo fighting titles like *Fatal Fury*, *World Heroes*, and *Samurai Shodown*, so *King of Fighters '94* was immediately alluring to me—particularly because it featured so many recognizable characters from the SNK lineup."

Leading up to the debut of *King of Fighters '94*, Lesyk recalled getting stoked about the game upon reading a prerelease article nestled in one of the best gaming magazines of the '90s.

"I remember first seeing images of *King of Fighters '94* in the pages of *Diehard GameFan* in the months prior to its debut," he recalled. "The game looked absolutely gorgeous, and I was eager to get my hands on it. I specifically remember how great the character models and game artwork appeared. It had a distinct anime flavor to it that helped it stand out from so many other titles that crowded the fighting game scene in the midnineties in the wake of the *Street Fighter II*/*Mortal Kombat* craze."

One character in particular that caught Lesyk's attention was Kyo Kusanagi, who would quickly be elevated to the main protagonist in the franchise. Kusanagi was first introduced in the game as the leader of the Japan team.

"For lack of a better analogy, Kyo came to be known as the 'Ryu' of the KOF series," Lesyk explained. "I remember thinking his hair was especially cool, so I began modeling my hairstyle after his! I spent the remainder of my freshman semester explaining to the other college girls why this somehow wasn't weird. Needless to say, it was met with only limited success."

Personally, I'm shocked—I would've thought "Kyo hair" would have been a raging success with the ladies!

What should come as no surprise is that the contemporary gaming press widely praised *King of Fighters '94*. Scores were high almost across the board for the title, with most outlets citing the game's terrific graphics, monster selection of fighters to pick from, and unique Team Battle Mode as the high points. This is particularly poignant when considering the sea of *Street Fighter II* wannabes in which *King of Fighters '94* dared to swim at the time.

GamePro had positive things to say about *King of Fighters '94*, tagging it with a 90 score, but the praise wasn't without qualifications. The review pointed out the impressive roster in terms of sheer numbers but said that some of those characters were duds, and that it was a bummer that you couldn't change up teams (a feature that would be added in future installments). Even so, the mag went on to say that "*King of Fighters* is the very best non-*Shodown* game available for the Neo Geo."

Electronic Gaming Monthly gave the game a score of 85, highlighting the excellent graphics and adding that "the music and sound are exceptional." The editors remembered the title fondly when it came time to dish out awards, honoring SNK's team-up fighter with both "Best Fighting Game" and "Neo Geo Game of the Year."

Playing *King of Fighters '94* on actual Neo Geo hardware (particularly in a bona fide arcade hall complete with the accompanying ambiance) is the preferred method for purists, but the game became much more accessible and was enjoyed by many more people years after the original release via multiple ports and rereleases.

"It was a welcome and considerably more affordable addition to many gamers' collections when it was eventually ported to other platforms such as the PlayStation 2 and Wii consoles via *SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1*," Lesyk explained. "The PlayStation Portable also received a port, but I generally find that fighting games on the PSP are hampered somewhat by the d-pad's inaccuracy."

In all, *King of Fighters '94* was an auspicious round one (or should that be round two?) for a series that's still massively popular even today.

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FUN FACT:

King of Fighters '94 isn't technically the first King of Fighters game. That honor goes to the original Fatal Fury, which was subtitled King of Fighters. Though it didn't have the series' staple team format, Fatal Fury is the first appearance of the tournament that serves as the backdrop for King of Fighters '94's ongoing story line.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The Neo Geo is known for having a cornucopia of solid fighting titles, and King of Fighters '94 is no exception. The game has a huge list of selectable fighters (24!), brilliantly vibrant artwork, explosive sound design, and intuitive control mechanics. It's no mystery why the King of Fighters series would go on to spawn more than 20 additional entries over the course of the following quarter century.

—Jason Micciche, writer and editor in chief at BrutalGamer.com

CHAPTER 36

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 PLAYER
1992

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The original *Legend of Zelda* (1986 in Japan, 1987 in the US) forever transformed the notion of what an adventure video game could be, and it arrived in America in the form of a shiny gold cartridge for the NES. The brainchild of directors Takashi Tezuka and Shigeru Miyamoto, *The Legend of Zelda* is a massive action/adventure game with role-playing elements that takes place in the overhead world and subterranean labyrinths of Hyrule's kingdom. Our southpaw elvish protagonist, Link, quests to find the lost fragments of a powerful artifact, the Triforce, and ultimately rescue the kingdom's princess, Zelda, from the clutches of the sinister Ganon. Starting off with only a small shield, our hero promptly encounters an old man who warns Link, "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this." Link is furnished with a rudimentary wooden sword, and off he heads into the wilds of Hyrule.

With its mind-blowing size, captivating narrative, tuned learning curve, and plethora of secrets, *The Legend of Zelda* quickly became a must-have title in the NES lineup. Players experienced a great sense of wonderment and satisfaction when they solved one of the game's more difficult puzzles. In an age long before the internet and online strategy guides, figuring out the game's myriad of mysteries was usually a lone task—one of much trial and error.

So popular was *The Legend of Zelda* that a sequel was promptly green-lit. This second installment, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, was . . . well . . . different. So different that it barely resembled the original *Legend of Zelda* in almost every notable regard. This time around, Miyamoto (who appears in the game's credits as the pseudonym "Miyahon") ditched the overhead perspective of the original and sought to design *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* as a side-scrolling adventure game reminiscent of *Castlevania* with sporadic overhead maps interspersed. Tezuka stayed aboard to author the story and script, but the remainder of *The Legend of Zelda*'s original production team was replaced.

Long story short, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* sold well on the basis of the reputation of the original game and received generally positive reviews. But as the cartridge's newness and gold-plated paint wore off, so did *Zelda II*'s allure. As time passed, critics and gamers alike began to see *Zelda II* for what it was: a confusing, arcane, overtly difficult title that only vaguely resembled the original in terms of theme and quality. In the many years since its release, *Zelda II* has fallen to the bottom tier of almost every ranked list of Zelda franchise titles. Despite all that, gamers still craved more from the series in the late '80s, but they'd have to wait a while.

As *Zelda II* was launching in 1988, Miyamoto was already hard at work conceiving the next entry in the series. That game would come to be known as *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* for the SNES. Unlike *Zelda II*, *A Link to the Past* felt like a proper successor, in that it visually and mechanically resembled the original game to a much-greater degree. When it hit North

America in 1992, fans of the franchise immediately embraced it.

A Link to the Past finds the player once again in the role of the series' faithful hero, Link. Despite being the third game of the series, it's actually a canonical prequel to both *The Legend of Zelda* and *Zelda II*. This time around Princess Zelda finds herself captive by the sinister wizard known as Agahnim, who aims to summon his evil master in a plot that spans both time and dimensions.

A Link to the Past reverts to the overhead perspective familiar to the original *Legend of Zelda*. Miyamoto once claimed, "Basically, I intend to make a return to *Zelda* 1's style. This is something I've had in mind since even before we began making *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*."

While much of *A Link to the Past* resembles the original NES title, it also ramps up the entire experience via a multitude of visual, auditory, and gameplay upgrades. The jump from 8 bit to 16 bit meant a plethora of improvements in the form of a bigger and more diverse world map, a beautifully orchestrated reimagination of the classic soundtrack, layered and multitiered environments, a cornucopia of new enemies, and much-improved inventory and map systems.

The game also incorporates more puzzle-oriented aspects with more secrets to discover, and a dimension-bending element where the player can alter the game's very landscape by traversing between Light and Dark Worlds. Link is aided in his quest by an assortment of items, weapons, and armor—some familiar and some new, including the first appearance of what would become one of the series' most recognizable symbols, the Master Sword.

But perhaps the most notable improvement was *A Link to the Past*'s exceptional narrative. The story and its supporting characters feel very fleshed out, and the weight of the quest feels palpable. As you explore and meet new faces throughout the vast land of Hyrule, your journey is molded with twists, turns, and surprises. The more you explore and discover, the greater and more epic the sprawling narrative becomes. It's both encouraging and rewarding, organic and compelling.

A Link to the Past became one of the bestselling SNES games of all time, with more than four and a half million units sold globally. It also notably maintained a long stay on *Nintendo Power*'s top-games-ranking list with an excess of five consecutive years in the number one spot. As an even truer testament to the game's agelessness and staying power, IGN proclaimed *A Link to the Past* as #11 in its "Top 100 Games" list in 2005—in that same issue, gamers voted it fifth overall. In 2009, *Game Informer* ranked it 12th on their "Top 200" games list. And as of this writing, *A Link to the Past* currently ranks #40 on Metacritic's list of video games—the highest-rated 16-bit title. That's high praise indeed for a game three decades old. Perhaps the best summation comes from Nadia Oxford of USgamer (www.usgamer.net), who once said, "*A Link to the Past* is inarguably a near-perfect specimen of game evolution."

When looking back upon the quantum leap transition from 8-bit to 16-bit gaming, it's impossible not to count *A Link to the Past* among the crowning achievements of that era. It's befitting that a game steeped in the spirit of looking backward through the lens of time to find meaning would be the one that may best serve as the quintessential example that true video game quality and enjoyment are, in fact, timeless.

For me, the greatest measure of this claim lies in the fact that I didn't play *A Link to the Past* when it first came out, nor did I play it for decades to come. I was a little salty after *Zelda II* and proceeded to place later Zelda games on the back burner as console generations came and went. I must confess that I actually first played *A Link to the Past* only a few short years ago, when I inherited a copy as part of my brother-in-law's video game collection from his childhood. At that point I had no excuse not to give the game a chance. Needless to say, I wasn't disappointed in the least. Experiencing such a superb game so many years after its debut reignited my passion for the franchise and led me to firmly agree with the overwhelming summation shared by most video game enthusiasts that not only is Zelda a franchise worthy of its fame, but that *A Link to the Past* is easily one of the greatest video games the world has ever seen.

The greater lesson learned here is perhaps that a truly excellent video game will always be excellent, irrespective of the passage of time and the advancement of technology. There's an intangible albeit present quality inherent to the "greatest of the great" games that keeps veterans coming back for more and beckons newbies to try it for the first time. May this book serve as a road map, if you will, to the games of yesteryear that evaded your radar or didn't coincide with your tastes of the time. Consider this your chance—your invitation—to form your own link to the past.

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FUN FACT:

Much like the original Legend of Zelda, there are numerous secrets, tricks, and hidden Easter eggs in A Link to the Past. One such secret consists of a hidden room that can be accessed only via unconventional means. It's a room containing 225 rupees that is known as the Chris Houlihan room. This room was included as a result of a Nintendo Power reader of the same name who won a contest that promised the winner's name would appear in the finished version of the game. Pretty cool! When you discover the room, he greets you and says, "My name is Chris Houlihan. This is my secret room. Keep it between us, OK?" Okay, Chris! (wink! wink!)

Sadly, many of the glitches the player would need to use have since been removed from subsequent rereleases of A Link to the Past, rendering the secret room inaccessible. But don't worry, Chris, we'll always remember you!

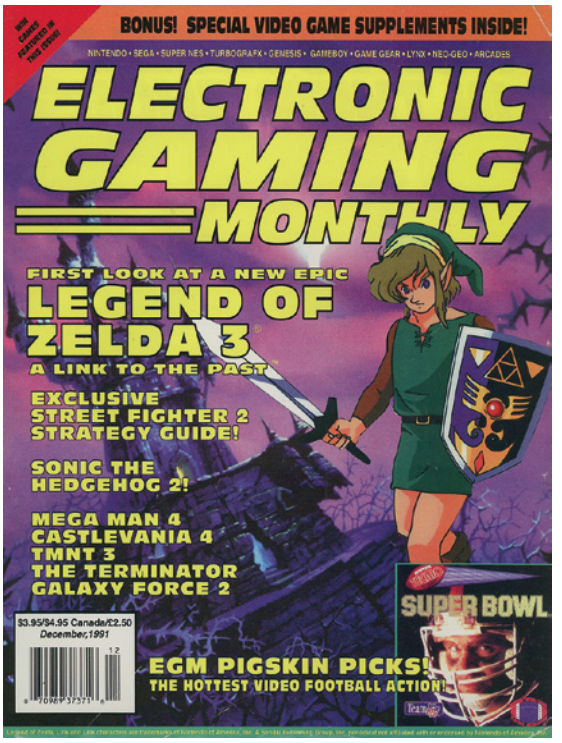
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

As of December 2020, the Zelda video game franchise has sold 126 million copies worldwide, with total merchandising and licensing revenue in the count of billions of US dollars. It has achieved household name status with absolutely no signs of slowing down. Long gone are the times we optimistically speculated about possibly receiving another Zelda sequel; it's a given now. It's practically ensured that each new Nintendo platform will receive a Zelda title at some point. This is largely attributable to the success of A Link to the Past. Yes, both prior games were massive successes in their own right, but A Link to the Past succeeded in cementing the franchise as a Nintendo mainstay for many years to come and the foreseeable future as it stands.

While I don't subscribe to the idea of a "perfect video game," A Link to the Past is as close to perfection as can be realistically expected or imagined. In fact, many modern games emulate and borrow from the many concepts A Link to the Past introduced and executed so deftly.

When browsing any list of all-time greatest games A Link to the Past's inclusion is almost a certainty, with this book being no exception. Later years would bring us many more critically acclaimed entries in the franchise, such as the N64's The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (2000), The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (2006) for the GameCube, and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017) on the Wii U, but players would be remiss to forget where the story really found its indelible foothold with A Link to the Past.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast



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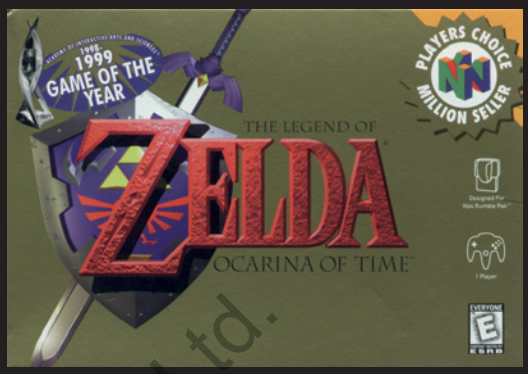
CHAPTER 37

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON 3-D ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 PLAYER
1998



When Nintendo released *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* for the Nintendo 64 on November 21, 1998, it was an instant commercial success, but the game was ultimately far more than simply a new killer app for their somewhat struggling console. It was a true watershed moment for video games as a whole and the setting of a new standard by which all games have been judged ever since. *Ocarina of Time* quickly became the highest-rated video game of all time—a 99% aggregate Metascore on Metacritic—and still holds that honor as of this writing.

After nearly four decades of gaming, no other title has had an impact on me comparable to *Ocarina of Time*. Having thoroughly enjoyed all of the previous games in the franchise, the notion of a fully three-dimensional *Legend of Zelda* was mind blowing when I first heard mention of the concept at some point in late 1994, stemming from buildup for the forthcoming "Project Reality," as the Nintendo 64 was known early in development. I spent countless hours scouring magazines and websites for every last detail I could find. I was obsessed. By the time the game was finally given a proper release date, I was desperate for new N64 games to play.

I remember preordering the game the summer before its release and absolutely losing my mind when I first saw the official Nintendo promotional video playing in-store. Even after more than 20 years I still have the preorder swag T-shirt hanging in my closet. I still have my original-release golden cartridge, in mint condition complete with manual and inserts in its shiny metallic-embossed box, my original save file from 1998 fully intact. For me, *Ocarina of Time* borderlines on a spiritual experience, and I will forever cherish it as one of the crown jewels of my game collection.

While playing previous *Zelda* games certainly helps to fully grasp the epic story's breadth, the classical sword-and-sorcery fairy tale of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* is masterfully crafted to stand on its own while still expounding on established canon. The story notably builds on the narrative arc found in the SNES classic *A Link to the Past* (Kensuke Tanabe was a writer for both games). While that game was divided into "light" and "dark" worlds, *Ocarina of Time*'s setting is split between a young Link's innocent past and the dark alternative future that befalls Hyrule after Princess Zelda attempts to use the titular clay flute's magic to stop Ganondorf from invading the Sacred Realm and claiming the mystical Triforce for himself.

Young Link's mission focuses on acquiring the renowned Master Sword, but completing his task produces an incredible narrative twist that alters *time itself*. He awakens seven years in the future, with Hyrule in ruins and Princess Zelda missing. Aided by a mysterious warrior named Sheik, an older, stronger Link must find the seven sages of time and defeat Ganondorf to save Princess Zelda and restore the timeline, using the power of the Ocarina of Time to jump between the past and

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future when required. The game's epic finale is a climactic battle for the ages between good and evil, with victory coming with a certain bittersweet je ne sais quoi that is beautifully poetic.

Though the game features virtually no voice acting, its expertly crafted cinematic presentation is beautifully enlivened throughout by a cast of wonderfully expressive and vibrantly animated characters. Shigeru Miyamoto, franchise creator and producer for *Ocarina of Time*, envisioned the game with a cinematic feel from the onset. The team intentionally set out to raise the bar for interactive storytelling, and ensuring a cohesive cinematic player experience was one of their top priorities. Originally intended to be a Nintendo 64 Disk Drive game, the decision was made to publish the game on cartridge once Nintendo canceled the poorly received peripheral.

The cartridge format's memory limitations meant such things as full-motion video and prerecorded music were off the table, but using real-time 3-D cutscenes ultimately proved quite beneficial for production, giving the developers ample flexibility for editing narrative or altering visuals as needed; something that wasn't possible with expensive and time consuming prerendering. Shigeru Miyamoto discussed this decision at length in his keynote address at the 1999 Game Developers Conference:

> We opted not to use that limited time and energy on prerendered images for use in cinema scenes, but rather on tests on other interactive elements and polishing up the game. . . . It may sound like an excuse, but it is not because the N64 doesn't have access to a CD-ROM that we incorporated real-time movie processing. Quite the contrary, to the greatest extent possible we were able to make use of truly cinematic methods with our camera work without relying on the kind of data typically used to make cinema scenes.

The real-time cinematics do an excellent job of seamlessly blending the game's storytelling and interactivity with visual splendor and drama—Zelda's vision of Ganondorf riding his nightmare steed through flames still gives me chills. While the graphics overall may not be as sophisticated as some N64 titles, there is still an undeniable charm to *Ocarina of Time*'s art direction that flawlessly illustrates the story and gameplay. An incredible amount of work went into the game's impressive real-time lighting and immersive audio. Despite being in MIDI format due to hardware constraints, Koji Kondo's beautifully orchestrated musical score perfectly complements the gameplay and narrative and has proven to be one of the most endearing video game soundtracks of all time.

With music an integral theme throughout the game, it only makes sense that the actual Ocarina of Time itself is a fully functional digital instrument that can be freely played to cast spells and reveal things hidden throughout Hyrule, a world absolutely brimming with secrets (try letting a butterfly land on a deku stick). Hyrule teems with life thanks to character-filled villages, detailed ambient audio, and a day/night cycle that affects everything from character behavior and enemy presence to the types of fish that can be caught in Lake Hylia. The moody and atmospheric dungeons are where the design genius of *Ocarina of Time* truly shines, though, each one skillfully crafted with a perfect mix of action and puzzle elements. The infamous Water Temple has become a legend in its own right over the years, a true marvel of ingenious level design whose notorious difficulty and rewarding boss fight perfectly embody the very essence of the Zelda franchise in wondrous fashion.

The game's user interface can appear visually clunky, but it succeeds in clearly presenting innovative features such as the "Z-targeting" system that players use to lock on to targets for easier navigation in 3-D, personified in-world by the fairy Navi, Link's (and the player's) loyal guide throughout the game (the name "Navi" was actually derived from "fairy *navi*gation system" during development). Her iconic "Hey, listen!" call is forever ingrained in gamers' minds. Link himself is surprisingly agile, with a vast array of maneuvers he can perform while combating the cleverly designed enemies (the Re-Dead are genuinely terrifying) and menacing dungeon bosses, or while simply exploring the impressively detailed environments, and all without a dedicated "jump" button. The play control benefits greatly from contextually based actions, allowing individual controller buttons to have multiple uses while keeping the controls simple and intuitive in every situation. The visceral swordplay mechanics, based on the dramatic Japanese *chanbara* fighting style, are fairly straightforward yet still have a surprising depth that makes combat feel genuinely rewarding.

After more than 20 years, countless accolades, and several rereleases, there is no denying the lasting appeal and success of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. The game originally sold roughly eight million copies worldwide for the Nintendo 64 and received several industry awards, including the prestigious "AIAS Game of the Year," along with similar honors from a host of gaming publications. It's nigh impossible to overstate *Ocarina of Time*'s importance in the history of video

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games, for the heights it raised the medium to and the creative potential it showed us all, changing interactive storytelling forever.

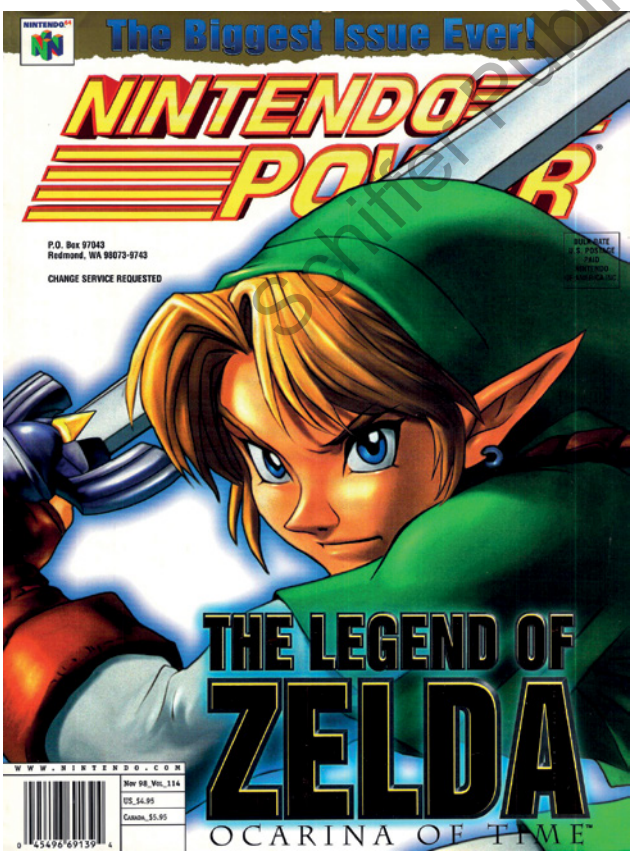
FUN FACT:

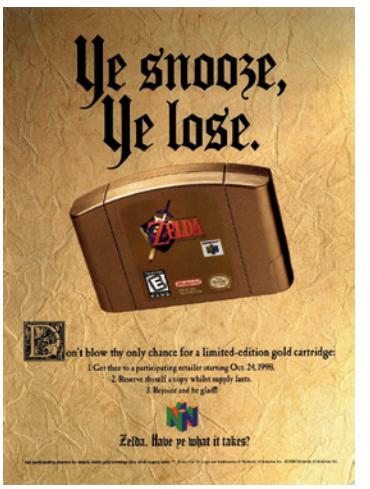
Dungeon design in The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time was led by Eiji Aonuma, who has directed or produced every game in the Zelda franchise since 2006's The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, including Breath of the Wild for the Nintendo Switch.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

With its incredible story, endearing characters, amazing soundtrack, and near-perfect game design, Ocarina of Time is a landmark achievement and true watershed moment for the video game industry.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist





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CHAPTER 38

THE LEGENDARY AXE

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NEC
DEVELOPER: VICTOR INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE
1 PLAYER
1989

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August 1989 marked the dawn of the next generation for console gaming. Most notably, Sega launched their 16-bit Genesis in North America. It would be two full years until we'd see Nintendo's answer wash ashore in the form of the Super Nintendo. But two weeks after the Genesis' debut, another 16-bit console found its way here—NEC Home Electronics' TurboGrafx-16.

Known as the PC Engine outside North America, the TG-16 featured an 8-bit CPU, a 16-bit video color encoder, and a 16-bit video display controller. The onboard GPUs are able to display 482 colors simultaneously out of a possible 512 available. The word "graphics" was right there in the name, so smooth, high-quality visuals were expectedly NEC's machine's core competency. Games were released on a credit-card-sized form factor called HuCards (similar to the card media for the Sega Master System). Later, the TG-16 would become the first console to adopt CD-ROM technology in the form of an available add-on unit known as the TurboGrafx-CD.

While gamers were busy playing the pack-in title, *Altered Beast*, on their newly purchased Genesis systems, TG-16 gamers had *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones*. In retrospect, neither game was outstanding—rather, just good enough to highlight some of the capabilities of their respective consoles and whet gamers' appetites for their next game purchase. When it was eventually realized that their consoles should be bundled with stronger games to drive sales, Sega swapped in *Sonic the Hedgehog* and NEC went with *Bonk's Adventure*.

When *Alpha Zone*'s charm wore out, many kids with indulgent parents gravitated toward *The Legendary Axe*. And why not? It had a cool-sounding name (better than *Keith Courage*, I think we can all agree), the box art was decent, and the gaming magazines of the time gave it glowing reviews. Safe to say, it didn't disappoint.

The Legendary Axe is a tale as old as time. Boy meets Girl. Boy falls in love with Girl. Girl gets abducted for the purpose of ritual human sacrifice by an evil cult and must rely on Boy to rescue her by killing everything he sees with a mythical axe. We've all been there.

In this side-scrolling "Metroidvania"-style game, you play as the barbarian, Gogan, a Tarzan-looking gent equipped with a legendary axe called Sting (someone must have been a Tolkien fan). You're tasked with leaving the safe confines of your hometown of Minofu to rescue your pink-haired lady friend, Flare, from the Evil Palace in the mountains.

Spanning six levels, the game pits you against baddies of all sorts as you explore caves, forests, and eventually the palace itself. Enemies include mutant frogs, massive spiders, bears who ambush you by breaking through background walls, and axe-throwing knights. As you progress through the game, you can power up Sting by breaking idol statues scattered throughout the land—some easier to find than others. Your weapon has a power meter similar to *R-Type* (Irem, 1987), in that it gradually fills the longer you cease from attacking. Sure, you can swing your axe rapidly, but the amount of damage inflicted is significantly dwarfed in comparison to a fully powered-up haymaker from a maxed-out meter. This adds a degree of strategy to your quest—do you go for the quick strikes or save up for the knockout punch? Each situation calls for a bit of forethought.

If you were to take the best parts of the arcade classics *Rastan*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, and *Karnov*, you'd have *The Legendary Axe*. The objective is simple, the learning curve is shallow, the presentation is beautiful, and the game is pure fun, albeit challenging. As a launch title for the TG-16, *The Legendary Axe* went above and beyond in its quest to showcase the system's capabilities in terms of audio/visual presentation. The music and sound are full of layers and life. Housed in the TG-16's HuC6280 CPU is a dedicated sound chip that runs at 3.58 MHz and a 5–10-bit PCM for processing stereo sound. All that adds up to phenomenal sound delivery.

Visuals, however, are where *The Legendary Axe* truly shines. Each uniquely themed stage features lush, detailed backgrounds. Character sprites are noticeably larger and considerably more animated than most others in the late '80s. And the level boss enemies are MUCH bigger than anything we had previously seen anywhere. In fact, *The Legendary Axe* contains one of the earliest instances of a jump scare in a video game. Early on, you unexpectedly fall through a pit into a small cavern where you are tasked with defeating a large and unpleasant-looking spider before you can climb out—it is a legitimately jarring moment. But it doesn't hold a candle to the seemingly impossible enormity of the game's final boss, Jagu. He's as tall as the screen and drawn with jaw-dropping detail. NEC made it a specific point to include a screenshot of Mr. Jagu in most of their marketing materials at the time. Truly he was worth showing off.

Much more can (and should) be said for the TG-16 and its treasure trove of high-quality and yet sometimes forgotten titles. Yes, the TurboGrafx finished a distant third in the Console Wars, but it wasn't for a lack of trying. The TG-16 succeeded in most overseas markets. It pioneered many firsts in the industry: the CD-ROM add-on and a five-player multiplayer adapter, and it even spawned the first fully functional handheld video game system that could play console versions of games on the go, the TurboExpress. Sadly, had the TG-16 simply launched a few weeks earlier, perhaps history would have been written differently.

FUN FACT:

The sequel, The Legendary Axe II, feels more like a Rastan game than The Legendary Axe. This is because the game was built upon the game Ankoku Densetsu, which utilized the Rastan base software. While The Legendary Axe II looks and plays somewhat different from its predecessor, it's still considered a solid TG-16 title (you use a sword more than an axe, but whatever).

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Despite (or perhaps because of) The Legendary Axe's relatively high degree of overall difficulty, it's widely considered to be one of the best—if not THE best—title in the TG-16 library. When it was initially released it received nearly unanimous praise. VideoGames & Computer Entertainment magazine recommended that every TG-16 owner buy it. It would later earn the title of VideoGames & Computer Entertainment's "Game of the Year" for 1989. Steve Harris of Electronic Gaming Monthly dubbed The Legendary Axe one of his all-time favorite games, calling its visuals, sound, and gameplay some of the best of any video game of its time. Nearly 10 years after its release, Electronic Gaming Monthly ranked it #80 on their "100 Best Games of All Time" list. Perhaps the most poignant analysis came from IGN's Levi Buchanan, who, in 2009, said The Legendary Axe "made the NES look downright ancient."

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast and gaming show

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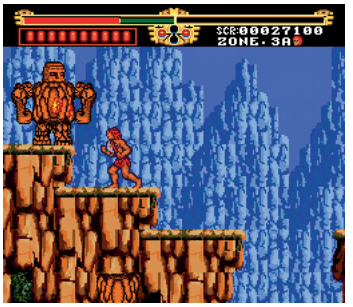

CHAPTER 39

MARIO KART 64

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: GO-KART RACING
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1997

By winter 1996, after many kids received their Nintendo 64 as a holiday gift, there was one title in particular that gamers were looking forward to playing in early 1997: *Mario Kart 64*. This game would continue the Mario craze that *Super Mario 64* had revived when the N64 launched in September. Mario was popular again! My friends and I were hooked on the new console, and then *Mario Kart* came to blow us away.

Mario Kart 64 released that February, when perfection in a cartridge arrived in the United States. As a sequel to *Super Mario Kart* for the SNES, the game blew up the driver/racing genre on the Nintendo 64. It had smoothly rendered graphics, cool designs, and great gameplay. With four controller ports on the console, multiplayer was a huge selling point for the game.

Fueled on soda and pizza, kids across the country would stay up until the early hours of morning, racing and battling each other, with close races, fights, aching hands, and bleary eyes creating unforgettable memories. As a young child during the '90s, some of my first sleepovers involved playing massive amounts of *Mario Kart 64*.

Before *Mario Kart 64* was released, *Nintendo Power*, which I would see at the local grocery store, was the main source of news for the game. If you could not convince your parents to buy you the magazine, you could read your friend's copy, or your friend might have on older brother who would buy it. While forums and message boards started to form online, information about new game releases was niche and hard to find. For less popular titles you oftentimes wouldn't discover the game until after it came out.

When my friend told me at school that his parents bought him a new video game and he wanted me to come over and play it, I had no idea we would be playing *Mario Kart 64*, which brings out the best and worst in friends. One turtleshell aimed just right could ruin the entire night shared with the closest of friends. A lightning bolt striking your car could mean a broken controller. Shortly after that night of many hours of races and battles, I begged my grandparents to buy me the game, which they did.

Mario Kart 64 is a major upgrade from *Super Mario Kart*, with a huge graphical overhaul. The processing power of the Nintendo 64 allowed for smoother animations and more-detailed courses. There are six returning characters to choose from, along with two new characters: Donkey Kong and Wario replaced Koopa Troopa and Donkey Kong Jr. from *Super Mario Kart*. During early demos of the game, the Magikoopa, Kamek, was a playable character, but he was later removed.

Mario Kart 64 offers 16 racetracks over four cups or circuits. To appeal to various skill levels, there are three speed difficulties: 50cc, 100cc, and 150cc. There is also a Battle Mode with its own separate track system. There are four fewer tracks than *Super Mario Kart*, but the game offers many more features overall, including shortcuts, new items, and a way to race your own ghost in a time trial. One of the biggest differences with the items is the loss of the feather and the addition of the blue turtleshell, which is a leader seeker shell that causes destruction for any racer in its path. The blue turtleshell would end up being one of the most notorious items used in *Mario Kart* for years to come, but the feature would not return until later games.

During early development of *Mario Kart 64*, the Nintendo dev team focused on trying to create a realistic

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kart racer, basing the physics on real-life RC cars that they studied. In an interview in the *Mario Kart 64 Official Japanese Guidebook* (1997), the game's director, Hideki Konno, said, "We experimented a lot. *Mario Kart 64* features a 3D analog stick, right? That analog stick is actually very similar to what you'd use to control an RC vehicle, so I bought a few RC vehicles to get a feel for it. The programmers did a bunch of research on the mechanics and physics of cars, too, and even created a computer simulation of those RC cars. Somehow it just didn't feel like go-karts—it was too realistic, too niche. We had some girls try it and it was totally unplayable to them. We knew this wouldn't work, so we then spent a lot of time talking things over and making adjustments. Almost nothing remains, therefore, of that first prototype we made. I guess that, ultimately, the controls we came up with were more straightforward, but on the positive side they were much easier to understand, and even a kid could more or less figure things out if you let him play for ten minutes."

This change of pace from a realistic kart racer to a fun-for-everyone game helped shape the culture and community around *Mario Kart*. The development team wanted to implement the ideas that were popular in *Super Mario Kart* while also making the game even more appealing for gamers of all demographics. Certain hard-core gamers criticized the fact that the tracks were wider and easier to navigate and that the game was easier overall.

In the *Mario Kart 64 Official Japanese Guidebook*, the game's producer, Shigeru Miyamoto, explained why the game might be easier for some: "*Mario Kart*, you see, was meant to appeal to a wide audience. We wanted to make a game where anyone, from age 3 to 100, could jump in and start competing right away, regardless of their skill level. So, in making a sequel, we decided that we didn't want to change most of the basic elements of the game. People have been saying 'video games are evolving,' and while there are some things that surely have to change, the truth is, keeping things the same does make it easier for the average person, doesn't it?"

While *Mario Kart 64* has broad-based appeal for gamers of all ages, there is a diehard community out there that continues trying to break *Mario Kart* speed records. *Mario Kart 64* became one of the most dedicated speed-run games alongside other classics such as *DOOM* and *Super Mario 64*. There are dedicated course records and lap records. Full-length cup runs are also a thing but are not as popular. These runs come down to a science, and sometimes the luck of the draw, since certain elements in the courses are unpredictable.

Regardless of where you are on the gamer spectrum (young or old, male or female, casual or hardcore), *Mario Kart 64* has something to offer if you enjoy arcade-style racers. The game truly stands the test of time, as evidenced by the competitive tournaments that still take place at bars, retro arcades, conventions, and homes across the country. The game remains popular with collectors as well. Easy-to-learn controls and familiar characters have made the game timeless.

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FUN FACT:

Mario Kart 64 features the first time that we hear the voices of Luigi and Wario in a video game. Luigi was voiced by Julien Bardakoff, while Wario was voiced by Thomas Spindler.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Mario Kart 64 helped the franchise become a major player for Nintendo, and the series continues today for the current generation. The game is fast (but not too fast), fun, and challenging (but not too difficult) and can be enjoyed by pretty much anyone.

—Alex Thompson, writer and pop culture journalist

CHAPTER 40

MEGA BOMBERMAN

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: TOP-DOWN ACTION/MAZE
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

The first game in the long-running Bomberman series I played was the original *Bomberman* for the NES. It struck me as nothing more than an old-school maze/action title with a twist. Instead of gobbling dots like in *Pac-Man*, shooting enemies like in *Wizard of Wor*, or zipping up sections of the playfield like in *Pepper II*, you strategically set bombs to destroy enemies and obstacles and then walk away so your character doesn't get blown up. The bombs explode in four directions, and the objective is to kill all the enemies, opening the exit to the next level. The mazes consist of concrete panels and brick walls, the latter of which may reveal power-ups when destroyed, which is a nice bonus and gives the game some variety.

This setup, which admittedly does get a little redundant, suited me just fine, since I am at heart an ultra-old-school gamer. (Much later, I even grabbed the NES Classic Series port of *Bomberman* for the Game Boy Advance since it's a good, simple game to play on the go.) I love the epic adventures on the NES such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid*, but I also enjoy the simple, retrograde, arcade-style games on the console. Little did I know that the *Bomberman* IP would spawn a legacy that would span generations, from the TurboGrafx-16 (*Bomberman '93*) to the Sega Saturn (the 10-player *Saturn Bomberman*) to the Nintendo 64 (*Bomberman 64*) to the Nintendo Switch (*Super Bomberman R*) and beyond.

My first brush with true *Bomberman* greatness was *Mega Bomberman* on the Genesis, which I picked up at FuncoLand sometime in the mid-1990s. Today it remains my favorite game in the series. I never experienced *Bomberman II* for the NES until much later, and now, as a collector, I know why: it is a rare game. And I didn't get *Super Bomberman* until after the Super Nintendo was phased out at retail, when I found it for $10 at a pawn shop in the big box with the four-player adapter. (Selling this item on eBay for around $160 a couple of years ago is one of my biggest gaming regrets.) Thus, *Mega Bomberman* was my first experience with multiplayer *Bomberman*. Suddenly, for me, *Bomberman* went from a routine (if enjoyable) maze title to one of the best retro four-player games of all time, right up there with *Warlords* and *Gauntlet*.

After coercing one, two, or three friends or family members into joining you, plug this awesome cart and a multitap adapter into your Genesis and get ready to set phasers on fun. You guide your little Bomberman character around a top-down playfield, releasing bombs strategically to get those bombs to explode in the pathways of the other Bombermen. Bombs you unleash also destroy soft blocks (hard blocks are indestructible) that can reveal a nice variety of power-ups. These include firepower (increases distance of bomb blasts), bomb (increases maximum number of bombs that can be set at one time), skates (increases running speed), bomb boot (enables Bomberman to kick bombs), remote control (the ability to detonate bombs), and bomb pass (the ability to walk through bombs), among others. These power-ups are fun to use and add lots of strategy to the action, but you should avoid sandals, since they will slow you down.

Computer players can fill in for missing humans, with each AI character featuring its own personality and fighting style. For example, Big Bomber rushes to find and grab all the items he can, Kamikaze Bomber

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sets bombs without concern for getting killed, and Construction Bomber ignores opponents and focuses on destroying blocks. There are nine such characters and ten selectable stages, including Sea Floor, Forest, Conveyor Belt (belts transport bombs and Bombermen), Europe (kicked bombs turn corners to follow maze arrows), and Magma (begin with maximum firepower and the ability to set five bombs at once). Watch out for skulls, which infect your Bomberman with a variety of maladies, such as opposite movement and unable-to-set bombs.

If you're gaming solo, which is fun and challenging but not as exciting as multiplayer, you bomb such creatures as bunnies, snails, aliens, and bosses, including a half-pealed banana. There are five multistage levels to complete. Jammin' Jungle is an overgrown forest region. In Vexin' Volcano, watch out for falling debris, and you can ride a cart that destroys enemies and blocks that are sitting on the track. Slammin' Sea features submarine enemies. Avoid bats and other nasty creatures in Crankin' Castle, where you can roll barrels at your opponents by bombing the barrel's supports. Finally, Thrashin' Tundra features penguins that fire missiles at red X targets that appear on spots around the maze.

Mega Bomberman is based on *Bomberman '94*, which was released on the PC Engine in Japan in 1993. That game allowed for five-player action, and some of the music is different. The rest of the game is essentially the same, including something that truly sets the action apart from most of the other titles in the series. As the game progresses, you'll be able to ride five different kangaroo-like characters called "Louies" you'll find randomly. Each Louie has a different skill, such as speed, kicking soft blocks, or kicking bombs over walls and blocks. Not only are these creatures a blast to ride, giving you a distinct advantage over the competition (unless they are also riding a Louie), they act as a hit point. Louies are a blast to ride and a big reason I cite *Mega Bomberman* as my favorite in the series.

Any time my nephew Chris visits from Okinawa, Japan, he comes over to hang out with me and the family. We watch movies, eat pizza, ride bikes, go to the park, and play *Mega Bomberman*. There are many great games in the Bomberman series, but *Mega Bomberman* is the one we return to again and again.

FUN FACT:

In 2020, Konami released Super Bomberman R Online for Google Stadia. It features Louies and a 64-player Battle Royale mode.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Louies and simple yet raucous four-player action make this a super-fun game you can play again and again when friends and family come over—it's my favorite game in a terrific series. Plus, you can get bombed without having a hangover the next morning!

—Brett Weiss

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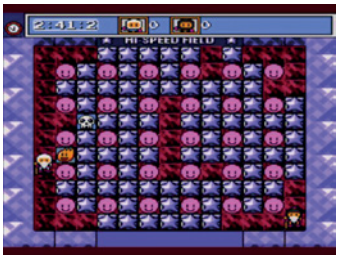

CHAPTER 41

MEGA MAN 2

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1989

During the holiday season of 1991 my parents opted for a unique approach shoppingwise, since my father took me to Toys "R" Us and allowed me to select my Christmas gifts in advance. As avid action figure enthusiasts, he and I spent a fair amount of time perusing the latest offerings within that section, and we emerged with an eclectic assortment from *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* figures to an X-Men Wolverine figure featuring a backpack that contained speech and sound effects. However, those were not my only items of interest that day. The video game section beckoned, and a specific title was at the top of my mind.

My first encounter with *Mega Man 2* was a few months prior at my friend Jason's house. On that day a friend of Jason's older brother had also stopped by for a visit, and the three of us sat transfixed as we watched him demolish an NES game that I had never seen previously. However, it was not just the impressive gameplay skill on display that had me awestruck, but the game's vibrantly colored level and character designs coupled with the catchy ear candy that was the game's soundtrack. Once he finished, I had a turn with the game and made a valiant attempt at mimicking his masterful play, to little avail. It did not matter, though, since I was thoroughly hooked and determined to own the cartridge and conquer it.

The game's iconic opening crawl lays out our hero's challenge. Dr. Wily has returned to spread mayhem with his new crop of dastardly robotic creations. Standing ever vigilant atop a towering skyscraper is Mega Man, ready to thwart the madman's scheme once again.

Capcom wisely carried the best aspects of *Mega Man* through to *Mega Man 2*. The gameplay and controls are consistent with the original, making the transition for seasoned players seamless. The overall progression is also familiar, with the player having the ability to choose the order in which to face Dr. Wily's Robot Masters. Each Robot Master resides in a level designed with its specific theme in mind, and possesses a unique ability that Mega Man inherits upon its defeat.

Each new ability earned provides a strategic advantage against one or more additional Robot Masters, so determining an order of attack is key, and often a topic hotly debated among longtime fans. Once the Robot Masters have been dispatched, Dr. Wily's Skull Castle awaits. The first four levels of Wily's fearsome fortress feature increasingly lethal stage designs and boss encounters, ranging from the visually awe-inspiring Mecha Dragon to the tactically challenging Boobeam Trap. The fifth level contains rematches with all eight Robot Masters, followed by an initial encounter with Dr. Wily as he pilots his latest technological terror. The sixth and final level sets the stage for the eerie and otherworldly final showdown with the mad doctor.

Regarded by many as the best entry within the original collection of NES *Mega Man* games, *Mega Man 2* set the template by which its successors were patterned. The game contains eight Robot Master stages, up from six in its predecessor. In addition to the weapons obtained upon defeating each Robot Master, three additional utilities, simply named Item-1, Item-2, and Item-3, are introduced, which enable Mega Man to overcome obstacles that would be otherwise extremely difficult to pass or outright insurmountable. These

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items are the forerunners to the capabilities provided in subsequent *Mega Man* titles by his beloved robo-canine companion, Rush.

While the original *Mega Man* is undoubtedly a beloved classic, it still frequently gets mentioned in discussions regarding the most-difficult NES-era games, since while it allows for continues, one is required to play the game from start to finish in one sitting. *Mega Man 2* is the first entry in the series to alleviate this burden by featuring a password system that allows for progression to be made over multiple gaming sessions. Moreover, *Mega Man 2* introduces the E-Tank, an item that supplies a full health bar replenishment. Peppered throughout the game, E-Tanks can be stockpiled within the inventory and utilized at any point. These additions ultimately made the game much more approachable for players of all skill sets.

Beyond the stellar gameplay, *Mega Man 2* has an epic soundtrack. The main title and individual level themes became treasured and timeless classics in the years following the game's release. However, these masterpieces did not come together without a fair amount of labor and refinement. In 2011, Hitoshi Ariga conducted an interview with *Mega Man* cocreator/codesigner Akira "A.K." Kitamura, for the *Rockman Maniax* compilation, a printed collection of humorous animated shorts featuring characters from the *Mega Man* games that was later transcribed on Shmuplations (shmuplations.com). During their conversation they touched upon the approach used to hone the musical composition:

Kitamura: After MM1 was released, it was decided that we'd do a sequel. For MM2, Takashi Tateishi was assigned as the composer, and I was really worried when I heard his first songs. I was taken aback—they were extremely cutesy sounding, like something from *Bubble Bobble* or *Fantasy Zone* . . .
Ariga: Ah, I read elsewhere that he said he struggled a lot with MM2. The planner (which must have been you) wouldn't sign off on his compositions, and it was just one rewrite after the other.
Kitamura: I realized what his mistake had been. He had looked at pictures of Mega Man and truly worked hard to write songs that captured Mega Man's world. Consequently, they all ended up feeling like variations on the theme of Mega Man's character.

When we requested songs from the composers, we'd send them pictures of the backgrounds and other sprites for guidance. The source of my worries with Tateishi's initial compositions was that they didn't match the game in-motion, while you were playing. They didn't match the movement speed or actions (jumping, shooting) of the gameplay, so despite the fact that they were very good songs, they felt too "laid back" in the game.

He was going to have to re-write them. At that point, I decided to try giving him some new guidance.

* You're floating in the water, everything is sparkling, but there's danger!
* The excitement of being up in the sky, of teetering right on the brink, don't look down!
* Hurry, hurry! Hurry, hurry, hurry!
* Concentrate, take your time and figure it out. Disappearing blocks.
* Keep moving along at a brisk pace . . . don't stand in one place for too long!
* Smash, crunch, crash, clank! The gears are turning!
* Slipping and sliding through an underground maze! This way, that way, this way, that way!
* Ascending the stairs higher and higher, climb, climb!

Ariga: Hah! I recognize those stages.
Kitamura: To accomplish that, I also told Tateishi not to focus on melodies like he had been. I said to try and let the changes in the rhythm express it. I think writing this way was much more difficult. I didn't want him to think about the visuals per se, but rather stay focused on the fact that these were going to be used in a game. [laughs]
Ariga: Wow . . . yeah, that does sound extremely difficult.
Kitamura: But thanks to those efforts, we ended up with songs like Crash Man, Heat Man, and Quick Man's stage themes. The short, repeated musical loops in Heat Man's stage and the intense music of Quick Man's stage really contribute to the player's sense of tension in-game. Tateishi did a great job. Of course I think MM1 is a good game, but in terms of all the challenges we faced and overcame, I think of MM2 as a major accomplishment.
Ariga: The music perfectly matches the mood of the game. Looks like your "guidance" worked . . . !
Kitamura: Tateishi's finished songs really exceeded my expectations. And it was cool seeing how he took ownership of them. At first, you see, it was just another job assigned to him. But as he

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gradually came to see these as his songs the quality went way up. That made me really happy.

Ariga: He must have been feeling like "I've got it now!"

Kitamura: Yeah. And so one day here's what happened. The usual pattern was that I'd go into the sound room and check on how he was doing. But one day, very unusually, he called me in, grinning, and said "I just finished something awesome!" That song was Wily Castle stage 1.

Ariga: Whoa . . . ! The birth of a legend!

Kitamura: That song, for Tateishi and myself, represented a culmination of all our efforts on this music. It instilled in us this feeling, like we were real pros now.

While the NES library features myriad all-time classics, *Mega Man 2* is one of the first games that I would recommend to someone who is a newcomer to the console, since it ticks all the boxes when it comes to what made games of that era legendary. It is easy to acclimate to, has a simple yet engaging story, features responsive controls and imaginative level design, has intriguing visuals and music, and is challenging to master but not to a torturous degree.

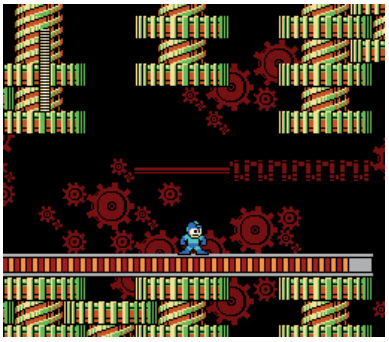
FUN FACT:

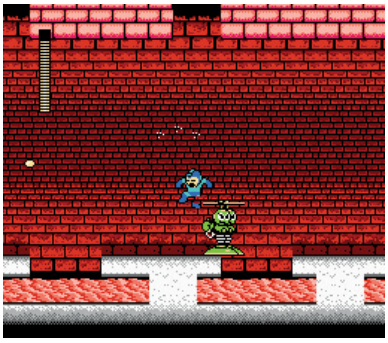
Mega Man 2 is the only entry within the NES Mega Man series that features two difficulty options.

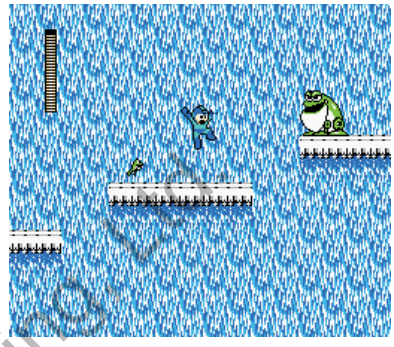
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

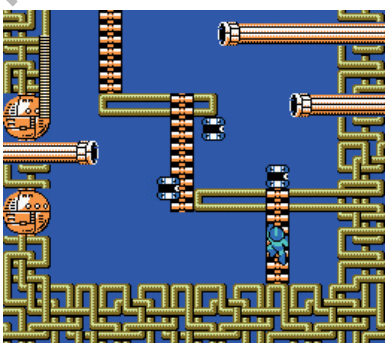
The Mega Man franchise is widely regarded as among the best the NES has to offer, and Mega Man 2 is the pinnacle of the six games in the 8-bit series.

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary









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CHAPTER 42

MEGA MAN LEGENDS

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: Third-Person 3-D Shooter / Action / Adventure
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1998

I began a lifelong love of video games when an NES came into my house in the late '80s, and it was through that system that I was introduced to one of my favorite characters of all time: Mega Man. When I wasn't renting the first chapters in the Blue Bomber's NES saga, I was wearing out the pages in my *Worlds of Power* novelization of *Mega Man 2*, plunking myself in front of the TV to catch the character on *Captain N: The Game Master* on Saturday mornings, or memorizing boss names for new games featured in magazines when our family would visit the local mall.

At the dawn of 3-D consoles, after playing *Super Mario 64* and reading previews for what would become *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, I was excited to see what Mega Man would look like in this bold new dimension. During a lunch break at school I scanned the pages of a video game magazine at a gas station, and my eyes laid on the first screens of *Mega Man Neo*, the game that would become known as *Mega Man Legends* in North America.

I was crestfallen to see that it was in the previews section for the PlayStation and not the Nintendo 64, the only console I owned at the time. In 2001 it came to the N64, rebranded as *Mega Man 64*, but by that point I not only had a PlayStation of my own, I also had the game's sequel, *Mega Man Legends 2*. I even had *The Misadventures of Tron Bonne*, a spin-off starring Tron Bonne and her adorable LEGO-esque minions, the Servbots.

Backing up a bit, as I awaited my entry into the PlayStation ecosystem, I excitedly daydreamed about what it would be like to one day play *Mega Man Legends*. During my high school computer class I would find any spare moment to look at the game's product page on Capcom's website, going so far as to clip some art of this latest rendition of Mega Man alongside his two counterparts and getting it pressed onto a T-shirt.

My brother got a PlayStation in 1999, and, of course, one of the first games I caught up on was *Mega Man Legends*. While it took me a little while to acclimate to its unique control scheme, it didn't take me long to become captivated by the game. In fact, it's easily one of my favorite renditions of the character. Even today I will champion *Mega Man Legends* to anyone who will listen, and beg them to try it any way they can.

Following in the footsteps of *Mega Man X* on the Super Nintendo, *Mega Man Legends* introduced us to a new take on the character. Mega Man lives on an airship in a world comprising a vast ocean and many tiny islands. His occupation is Digger, a name given to those who search perilous underground ruins for Refractors, which are the world's primary energy source.

Upon suffering engine trouble, Mega Man, along with his adoptive grandfather and sister, Roll, become stranded on Kattelox Island. To repair their ship, Mega Man and his family must dig for the necessary components to power it while fighting off a family of pirates known as the Bonnes, who themselves are hunting for riches. As they venture deeper into the island's ruins, Mega Man finds himself uncovering secrets about his mysterious past and how it relates to a legendary treasure known as the Mother Lode.

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Mega Man Legends has terrific art direction and world building. It wastes little time in explaining this new universe and paints Kattelow Island as a warm, vacation-like getaway with its green fields, chirping birds, upbeat music, and friendly residents. Arriving in the same year as *Metal Gear Solid* and the year after *Final Fantasy VII*, the game impresses even today, since its entire story is told in-game without cutting away to prerendered cinematics, which is an impressive feat in the PlayStation era. On top of that, in story sequences, characters have emotive faces with moving mouths, though the lip syncing doesn't match the English dub.

Your goal in *Mega Man Legends* isn't to hunt down eight robot masters. If anything, the game owes more to *The Legend of Zelda* than classic *Mega Man*. You explore an overworld where you speak with the townsfolk, shop, and eventually venture into subterranean dungeons. The biggest obstacle in the game is learning its controls, since you have to babysit the camera with the right and left shoulder buttons. To compensate, you have a lock-on mechanic—introduced before Z-targeting in *Ocarina of Time*—and large bosses are structured in a way where circle strafing is a key strategy that also suits the control scheme.

Although it doesn't follow the traditional formula, *Mega Man Legends* does have some DNA from the classic titles. You can find items in Kattelox's enormous, interconnected caves. Said items can be used to build weapons such as a laser sword, a vacuum to suck up currency, and a drill to break down barriers. Your primary weapon, the buster, also has slots where you can experiment with different load-outs like in a traditional RPG. Though there are no animal-themed Mavericks or robot masters with "Man" in their name, be prepared to contend with massive war machines built by Tron Bonne and Reaverbots, which safeguard Kattelox's treasures.

Following the main story beats, you can complete *Mega Man Legends* in a handful of hours, but doing so would rob you of much of its charm, which comes from helping the citizens of the island. The side content is wonderful here, ranging from competing in game shows to boost a television stations' ratings, to finding artifacts to display in a museum, to helping a little girl walk again by investing in new hospital equipment. There's a hopeful optimism underlying *Mega Man Legends* that will warm your heart.

The reviews for *Mega Man Legends* at the time of its release ranged from average to somewhat negative. In the October 1998 issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, Crispin Boyer said in his 6.5/10 review, "It ain't without its flaws, but *Mega Man Legends* is still a fun diversion from all that side-scrolling *Mega Man* same ol', same ol'." John Davison was far more critical with his 5.0/10 review, stating, "I hate the graphics, Mega Man's Canadian accent sounds ridiculous, the control system sucks the big one, and the fact that you can't skip through story / talky bits is annoying."

In the years since, *Mega Man Legends* has been looked upon far more fondly. *Mega Man* fan and expert Jeremy Parish, host of the *Retronauts* podcast, said in "NES Works Gaiden Episode 11" that "the world of Kattelow island, both above and below ground, remains one of the most solidly crafted and populated settings in gaming. . . . It's different enough from modern action games, in both good ways and bad, that somehow feels fresh today. Or, if not fresh, refreshingly different."

As to why *Mega Man Legends* feels so different from the classic and X series, producer Keiji Inafune, in an archived interview from the *Official PlayStation Magazine*, revealed it was an effort to broaden the franchise's audience:

> Of course, this being Mega Man, there's a lot of action in the game. But if we had made it a pure action game, people who aren't good at action games would be excluded, so we've included RPG and adventure mechanics as well. Even those who aren't very good at action games should be able to enjoy *Mega Man Legends*. In previous Mega Man games there's not been much of a point to collecting money, but in this game, you can use the money to power up your Mega Buster, up to level 8. And you can power up other weapons you acquire too, like an RPG. There's a bit of strategy allowed in what you upgrade as well: if you're dying a lot you can choose to raise your life first, for instance.

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FUN FACT:

Mega Man antagonist Dr. Wily appears here, but he's reborn as a friendly boat owner who will loan you one of his vessels to reach a dungeon.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Despite feeling different from previous outings, Mega Man Legends retains the series' robot-blasting, weapon-collecting mechanics while simultaneously crafting characters you quickly learn to love and care about in a world you're sad to leave when the credits roll.

—Blair Farrell, owner and content generator for Comic Book Video Games (comicbookvideogames.com), author of The Web of Spider-Man Games: The Amazing and the (Not So) Spectacular

CHAPTER 43

METAL GEAR SOLID

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: ACTION/ADVENTURE/STEALTH
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 PLAYER
1998

"My biggest failure is *Metal Gear*. It's my biggest failure and my biggest success."

Welcome to the slyly self-aware, incalculably philosophical, tirelessly perfectionistic, frustratingly enigmatic, and endlessly creative mind of legendary Japanese video game creator Hideo Kojima.

Kojima, the youngest of three children, was born in 1963 in Tokyo, Japan. His father, a pharmacist, named his son after the most common name he encountered among the many doctors he knew. At a very young age, Kojima was introduced to the world of cinema. Kojima's parents began the tradition of movie watching on a nightly basis. So important was this tradition that the children were not allowed to go to bed until they had completed viewing that evening's movie. Parenting done right! It was from then forward that Hideo Kojima formed his insatiable interest in film. That tradition is kept alive to this day, since Kojima once claimed, "I try to watch a movie a day, if not more. And through movies, I learned about so many different political themes I hadn't been interested in and cultural things I hadn't been aware of and economic factors I hadn't thought about."

Kojima broke into the gaming industry in 1986, when he joined Konami. He once recalled that the reason why he initially applied to work for Konami was because they were the only video game developer listed on Japan's stock exchange at the time. His first assignment at Konami was to work on *Penguin Adventure* (1986) for the MSX home computer platform. Kojima's contributions were immediately recognized, and it wasn't long before he was asked to take over a larger existing project from a senior associate. That game was *Metal Gear*.

The world would get its first taste of Kojima's signature franchise in 1987, when *Metal Gear* debuted on both the NES/Famicom and MSX2 gaming consoles. Its arrival heralded a different approach to gaming, focusing on stealth and conservative combat versus traditionally mindless running and gunning. Despite becoming a relatively successful franchise early on, the following 16-bit-console generation wouldn't see a follow-up *Metal Gear* game, as though the franchise had been inexplicably abandoned. It wasn't until over a decade later, in 1998, when Kojima would grace the world with *Metal Gear Solid*. Everything was about to change.

Given the quantum leap in technical capabilities of the CD-ROM-based PlayStation, *Metal Gear Solid* was the first in the Metal Gear series to be presented in a 3-D landscape, along with a fully orchestrated musical score. Packed with theatrical cutscenes, captivating writing, convincing voice acting, and an intricately woven plot, *Metal Gear Solid* feels more like an interactive high-quality Hollywood blockbuster than just another video game. Kojima's zest for the film industry underpins the entire experience, from its opening sequence through its closing credits.

One of the chief hallmarks of the Metal Gear series is its complex, sometimes staggeringly detailed plot. As a quick overview, *Metal Gear Solid* takes place in the year 2005 and rejoins our hero, Solid Snake, as he works to infiltrate a captured nuclear weapons disposal facility in the Alaskan archipelago to nullify an imminent nuclear threat. Players expecting to just

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jump into the game and shoot their way to victory are immediately shut down; that approach rarely works here. Even in the game's first few minutes, it presents a humbling challenge—one that forces the player to slow down, think, anticipate, and carefully react. Snake must use the environment to conceal himself from his enemies, strategically placed surveillance cameras, elusive sensors, and the like, all of which litter the premises.

The game relies heavily on trial and error. Even when you finally accomplish an objective, you'll feel compelled to try it again to do it better. It's an exercise in perfectionism crafted in the very image of Kojima himself.

Metal Gear Solid falls into a category that few other games can claim—it's important. Not just fun (which it is), and not just revolutionary (which it is), and not just addictive (which it is). *Metal Gear Solid* is an undeniably important game whose ripples of influence are strongly felt to this day. It represented a certain fearlessness in game crafting that now seems obvious in retrospect. It made it okay to break the fourth wall. It made it permissible to entrust the audience to grasp complex, politically dense plot lines. It gave merit to the gruff and sullen antihero whose calculating approach to doing his job was matched only by his loyalty to the job itself. It urged us all to think big while presenting Snake as relatively small and overwhelmed by the harsh realities of geopolitical conflict and larger-than-life enemies. Snake himself is nothing more than a gear—a rotating cog in a post–Cold War world tasked with sweeping up the ugly, untold pieces at the behest of so many bureaucratic "good guys." And despite its sobering and surreal, terrifying subject matter, *Metal Gear Solid* retains a very tangible sense of humanity, and even some jarring moments of levity.

Snake isn't a cold-blooded killer by nature; he simply refuses to allow feelings to interfere with his mission. In periodic instances of welcomed escapism, Snake holds dialogue (mostly via radio) with other support characters who offer hints, insight, and witty banter as he proceeds. *Metal Gear Solid* is a rollercoaster ride of a game that is often punctuated by moments of sheer emotional overload, such as Sniper Wolf's final moments, the Revolver Ocelot torture scene, the Psycho Mantis encounter—all visceral perfection.

It's difficult to choose a favorite moment among so many, but whenever anyone mentions *Metal Gear Solid*, my mind instantly conjures images of the game's jewel case itself, oddly enough. Those who have played the game might know what I mean here, but it takes a certain degree of brilliance and badassery to actually involve the game's packaging as a functional and vital component of a game.

Speaking with *Electronic Gaming Monthly* in 2012, Kojima expressed a hint of ambivalence while reflecting on the Metal Gear series. "I haven't really shown the world what else I might be capable of yet," he professed. "This may sound pretentious, but I don't like being thought of as 'the *Metal Gear* guy.' There's a lot more I can do."

As such, gamers should note that Kojima has served as a producer, director, writer, or designer (or a combination of these) on more than 40 games from 1986 to 2019. These include more than a few acclaimed titles, such as the *Blade Runner*–inspired *Snatcher* (1988), the mech warfare Zone of the Enders series, 2014's *Silent Hill* tech demo *P.T.*, and 2019's postapocalyptic package delivery simulator, *Death Stranding*.

Perhaps Kojima-san's grandest accomplishment is that he proved that video games can be much more than the sums of their parts. Through his many diverse works, he has shown that video games are worthy of being considered as art. His creations challenge our preconceived notions—the unwitting programming that we as gamers have received through exposure to so many other games of varying caliber, scope, and mental stimulation. Realizing this does not besmirch those "other" games, because they serve their purpose well and are as they are intended to be. Nonetheless, that realization opens the door to accepting the possibility that gaming is limitless. Just as we revere the written word, the painted canvas, and the moving picture as artistic trappings of the human condition, so must we embrace the vision that video games are on equal footing.

Throughout the gaming industry, *Metal Gear Solid* is studied and revered like the Torah, and rightfully so. It accomplished a complete and thorough technical linkage that unified all the key components of what defines a top-quality gameplay experience and then some.

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FUN FACT:

In Metal Gear Solid and most of its subsequent sequels, the character's signature gravely, gruff voice is provided by Canadian American David Hayter, an accomplished voice actor, director, producer, and writer. Hayter wrote the screenplays to 2000's X-Men and 2009's Watchmen.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Given that Metal Gear Solid is structured more like a film than a game, it's relatively short in overall length. The entire story can be played from start to finish in just a few hours. That should not suggest that Metal Gear Solid doesn't provide endless opportunities for replay. Though the game is crafted in a somewhat linear fashion, there are many ways to achieve your objectives along the way. Different paths can be taken and tactics employed to get from point A to point B. Most fans of the game will find themselves replaying it more than a few times. And just like our favorite movies, we're almost guaranteed to notice something new and exciting with repeated viewings and playthroughs.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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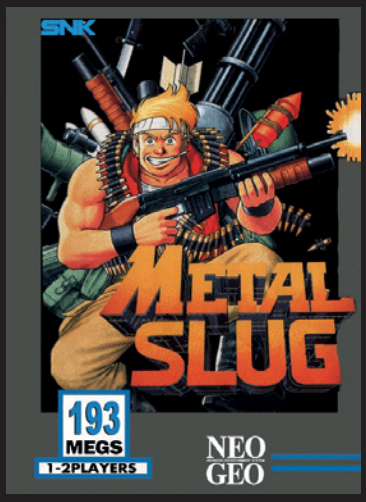
CHAPTER 44

METAL SLUG



NEO GEO
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: SNK
DEVELOPER: NAZCA
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1996

Released during an era when console gaming was transitioning from 2-D graphics to 3-D thanks to the Sony PlayStation, Nintendo 64, and Sega Saturn, *Metal Slug* is an unapologetic, brutally intense, 2-D side-scroller that fans of such games as *Contra* and *Contra III: The Alien Wars* will thoroughly enjoy.

As either the blond-haired Marco Rossi or the shades-wearing Tarma Roving, you run along firing a pistol at a plethora of evil soldiers that appear in your pathway and jump out at you from all directions. When you are in proximity to an enemy, you can perform a melee knife attack, which is one of the key aspects separating the game from the Contra series. Enemies can perform melee attacks against you as well. In addition to blowing away soldiers, you'll fire away at aircraft, boats, cannons, tanks, and helicopters, the last of which drop bombs that you must of course dodge.

From time to time you will commandeer a Metal Slug tank. It is a blast to operate, in part because it can jump and crouch just as your character can. It is equipped with a main cannon that fires powerful bombs in limited numbers and a standard rifle on a turret. While driving the tank, you can take several hits before being destroyed. When the tank loses all its hit points, it will flash red, prompting you to jump out and rejoin the action on foot, and then it will explode. Savvy players can send the tank rolling over enemies to destroy them kamikaze style.

The game starts in dramatic fashion as you enter the playfield, swooping down via parachute, accompanied by music that sounds like it was cribbed straight from classic TV's *The A-Team*. At first, you are armed only with a simple semiautomatic handgun, but you can acquire more-powerful weapons by rescuing prisoners of war. You'll encounter said POWs tied up at various points throughout the game. These poor dudes look like they haven't had a shower, shave, change of clothes, or hot meal in a very long time.

By shooting the POWs or slashing them to undo their bonds, you can free them, and they'll wander around loose where they were tied up. Touching them frees them completely, and they will leave behind point items or weapons, such as shotguns, rocket launchers, or flamethrowers. You haven't truly lived until you've used that massive flamethrower to blast parachuting enemies, who scream in agony as they burn to death. The game is cartoonish, so it's more shocking than gory, but it does pack a wallop. You can also acquire grenades, which are great for taking out tough enemies, such as tanks. For ultimate over-the-top action, a second player can join in on the carnage to help you out.

In the October 1996 edition of *Neo Geo Freak* magazine, the development team at Nazca gave insight on the frenetic nature of *Metal Slug*: "Our basic concept was an action game with a good sense of speed, with somewhat comical characters. I say comical, but for the mechs and effects, we aimed for something realistic and stylish. We wanted everything on screen to be immediately and easily understandable with just a glance. We were conscious of making something that should appeal to a wide audience, both those who are relatively used to games and those who are not."

The team also weighed in on the type of player who they figured would enjoy the game: "The kinds of players who are interested in a game like *Metal Slug* want to be able to get really deep in the game. They want to be able to study up on new techniques and

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discover new things. So one of our basic development themes was to add things like the scoring system and hidden features, to give the game a little bit more length and depth. Of course, we also made sure it would be fun for the general player who isn't interested in scoring."

When the Neo Geo was new in stores, it was hundreds of more dollars than other consoles of the era, so I took a hard pass on purchasing one, but I did play *Metal Slug* in the arcades. The game is brutally difficult, since enemies surround you on all sides, with bullets flying all over the place and bombs dropping everywhere, so it's a real quarter-gobbler, and I never finished it originally. However, late in the first decade of the 2000s, I was super excited to discover a *Metal Slug* machine a few miles from our house at a free-play arcade called Tornado Terrys Family Amusement Center. After paying your entry fee ($9 at the time) you could play any game again and again without spending any more money, so I finally got the chance to keep continuing and beat *Metal Slug*. It was a great day, not only because of *Metal Slug* but because I took my nephew Chris with me, and we spent most of the day there, breaking only for a quick outing to Taco Bell.

These days I primarily play *Metal Slug* on *SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1* for the PlayStation 2. It's a cool compilation disc that also features 15 other games, including such classic titles as *Art of Fighting*, *Samurai Shodown*, and *The King of Fighters '94* (sadly, there never was a volume 2). I also have the game on *Metal Slug Anthology* for the Wii, but you have to flick the controller (as opposed to simply press a button) to unleash a grenade, which is annoying, so I usually stick with the PS2 version.

Metal Slug inspired several direct numbered sequels, as well as such offshoots, spin-offs, and remakes as *Metal Slug X* and *Metal Slug XX* (various), *Metal Slug 1st Mission* and *Metal Slug 2nd Mission* (Neo Geo Pocket Color), and *Metal Slug Advance* (Game Boy Advance). In addition, the series extended to iOS/Android, where it branched off into such tower defense games as *Metal Slug Defense* and *Metal Slug Attack*.

FUN FACT:

In 2006, SNK released a 3-D take on the franchise for the PlayStation 2 simply called Metal Slug. It was issued in Japan to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the series, but it had largely negative reviews and never made it to the United States.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Metal Slug exists for one reason—other than to make money for the parties involved—and that is FUN. The game is an absolute blast from start to finish, with cartoonish humor, nice graphics and sounds, and fast-paced running, jumping, and shooting action. The series proved that 2-D gaming was still a contender as the industry began transitioning to 3-D.

—Brett Weiss

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CHAPTER 45

MORTAL KOMBAT II

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: SCULPTURED SOFTWARE
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

MORTAL KOMBAT! Two words that are synonymous with arcade culture of the 1990s. A franchise that sparked controversy, debate, legal action, court hearings, and the introduction of the Entertainment Software Rating Board. (Other titles had a role in the formation of the ESRB as well, but *Mortal Kombat* was definitely a major player.)

During fall 1992, when the original arcade version of *Mortal Kombat* was released in North America, eager onlookers surrounded the game in arcades all over the US, watching players beat one another to a bloody pulp on the screen. Kids and adults alike would pump tons of quarters into the game, hoping to uncover a new fatality, cool fighting move, or secret character.

When consumers got the chance to own a home console version of the popular fighter, gamers were stoked to try to discover the secrets of the game without having to spend a fortune in quarters. *Mortal Kombat* for the Genesis and Super Nintendo were released September 13, 1993, a day famously known as "Mortal Monday."

Thanks to Nintendo's strict policies, the SNES cartridge was watered down to be more family friendly. Genesis users could input a code (ABACABB, which was in reference to *Abacab*, the album by the Phil Collins–led rock band, Genesis) to allow blood and uncensored fatalities, such as ripping out your opponent's spine or cutting them in half, but in the Super Nintendo game the blood is gray (to resemble sweat), and most of the fatalities were replaced with less violent finishing moves. Nintendo's actions pleased many parents but upset countless *Mortal Kombat* fans, and the Genesis cartridge sold far better and was considered much cooler.

Lucky for Super Nintendo owners, money talks, and Nintendo placed no such restrictions on *Mortal Kombat II*; the result was a bloody, gory, overtly violent port that was about as accurate in terms of graphics and gameplay as you could hope for on a 16-bit console.

Mortal Kombat II was released on the SNES, Genesis, Game Gear, and Game Boy on Friday, September 9, 1994, a day heavily hyped by magazine ads. A 45-second TV spot was also released that many *Mortal Kombat* fans still talk about today. Midway and Acclaim did a great job with their advertising campaign, since more than 2.5 million copies of the game were sold within the first few weeks of launch.

Many consider the SNES version of *Mortal Kombat II* to be one of the greatest arcade ports of all time. The Genesis port is no slouch, but the Super Nintendo game has smoother gameplay and, thanks to a more advanced sound chip, better and more-accurate music and sound effects. The SNES controller was also the popular choice for the home version with its four-button layout.

In an interview in the August 1994 issue of *GamePro*, John Tobias, a cocreator of the Mortal Kombat franchise, told the magazine, "I would go so far as to say that the Super NES version [of *Mortal Kombat II*] is one of the best arcade-to-home conversions I've seen."

I first became aware of *Mortal Kombat* in 1995, around the time *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3* hit arcades. My friends and I would get together at school to talk about the crazy things we saw in the game, and we'd dream of discovering how to pull off specific fatalities. When it came to bringing the fight home, *Mortal Kombat II* was a regular rental for sleepovers. We'd battle all

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night, trying to ascend the ladder of fighters and discover how to unlock a secret character.

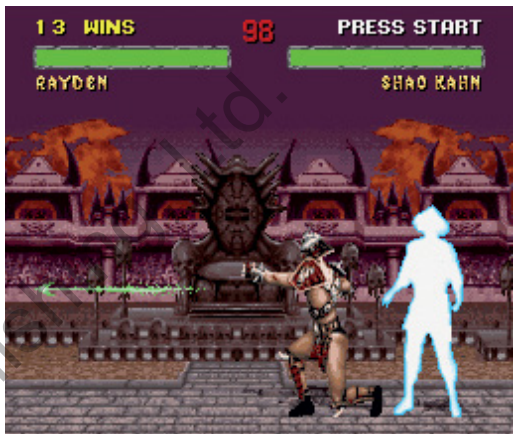
I would write down hints from battles that would pop up when I made it to certain parts of the game. I would even go as far as printing off multiple sheets of moves and fatalities from my grandparents' computer, using Windows 95 and America Online. When I brought this list over to friends' houses, we were guaranteed to be playing well into the next morning. The game's many secrets meant it was constantly teasing at more things to be discovered. It had excellent replay value, and my friends and I fought countless rounds.

Mortal Kombat II featured 12 playable fighters, up from seven in the first game. Kano and Sonya were the only two playable fighters that did not return for *MKII*. One of the new playable characters was the boss Shang Tsung from the first *Mortal Kombat*. According to *Mortal Kombat* mythos, Shang Tsung was given his youth back to him so he could compete at a higher level in this tournament.

The sub-boss of the game is Kintaro, a tiger-striped Shokan and the successor of *Mortal Kombat*'s first sub-boss, Goro. *Mortal Kombat II* was also the first appearance of Shao Kahn. He took his throne as the King of Outworld and the boss of *MKII*. Several secret characters were available to fight in the game as well. With the popularity of the secret green ninja, Reptile, in the first *Mortal Kombat*, the development team decided to add three characters that you could fight if you met certain conditions during the arcade ladder or two-player combat. The three characters introduced were Noob Saibot, Smoke, and Jade. All three would go on to be staples of the series.

The bread and butter of *Mortal Kombat II* was the addition of multiple types of fatalities. New ways to finish your opponent, such as friendships, babalities, and new stage fatalities, were introduced in this game. All playable characters featured two signature fatalities, a friendship, a babality, and the ability to do a stage fatality. Johnny Cage could also extend his decapitation fatality to where he would uppercut three heads off. Pulling one of these off on an unexpecting friend was the peak of playing the game. Fatalities were what set *Mortal Kombat* apart from games such as *Street Fighter II* and *Fatal Fury*. The ability to end your opponent in a violent way was very satisfying and shocking. It could also be darkly hilarious, with limbs and body parts left all over the battlefield, and pretty much everything was retained for the SNES port.

While the graphics and sound can't quite match up with the arcade, the trade-off is that there's a secret



"team battle" mode. In this mode, two players pick four characters and fight it out, with a new character appearing whenever one loses all their health, sort of like *King of Fighters*.

Upon release, *Mortal Kombat II* received overwhelmingly positive reviews for both 16-bit versions of the game, but most preferred the Super Nintendo port, including the reviewer for the September 1994 issue of *Game Players* magazine, who wrote, "You might note the SNES version has a slight, if definite edge over the Genesis version. . . . Although you'd probably expect the SNES version to look better, it plays better too. But we're splitting hairs. Whatever system you own, this is a must have this season."

In issue #63 of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* the reviewer of the Genesis port wrote, "You have to face some of the limitations of the Genesis. If you do, you'll have to admit that *MK II* is a great translation. If you compare it to the Super NES, sure it isn't quite as detailed or colorful, but it is good nonetheless. Play control is a bit lighter on this platform, but it controls well enough to get some heated battles going."

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FUN FACT:

Noob Saibot's name is a combination of the two Mortal Kombat cocreators John Tobias and Ed Boon's last names, but backward. When flipped it reads "Tobias Boon." This character would later be revealed as the original Sub-Zero, who died at the hands of Scorpion in the first Mortal Kombat.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

While some gamers consider Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3 and Mortal Kombat Trilogy to be the pinnacle of the Mortal Kombat franchise, Mortal Kombat II created the momentum to allow the series to continue for many decades to come. It set the standard for what we would expect out of a Mortal Kombat game and showed developers that video games can be marketed toward older age groups. It pushed the limits of what is considered "okay" in video games when it comes to violence, and put parents on edge throughout the world.

—Alex Thompson, writer and pop culture journalist

CHAPTER 46

MR. DO!

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: MAZE
PUBLISHER: BACK PEARL SOFTWARE
DEVELOPER: IMAGINEER
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (ALTERNATING, SIMULTANEOUS)
1996

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As I mentioned in the foreword to the book you are holding in your hands, Universal's *Mr. Do!* from 1982 is my favorite video game of all time. It has been so for many years, dating all the way back to the largely excellent ColecoVision port, which came out in 1983. Then, in 1996, something unexpected happened. The little clown that could was ported to the mighty Super Nintendo, complete with an exclusive two-player Battle Mode.

When I tell people *Mr. Do!* is my favorite game, I often get blank stares, since many casual and younger gamers have never heard of it. It's not exactly a hidden gem, but it's hardly *Pac-Man* either. To those unaware people, I tell them the game is similar to *Dig Dug* (1982), which is more well known today in part because of its appearance on various iterations of *Namco Museum*, a popular arcade collection for a variety of current and recent consoles.

Before I get to the Super Nintendo version of *Mr. Do!*, some history is in order. When the arcade original first appeared on the scene, it was overshadowed by such hits as Midway's *Ms. Pac-Man*, Taito's *Jungle Hunt*, Nintendo's *Donkey Kong Jr.*, Sega's *Zaxxon*, and, yes, Namco's *Dig Dug*. It lurked in relative obscurity for a few months, selling a couple of thousand machines (contrary to popular belief, *Mr. Do!* was first released as a dedicated cabinet), until something interesting happened. Universal rereleased *Mr. Do!* as a conversion kit, spurring it to become one of the more ubiquitous coin-op games of the era.

According to Steven L. Kent, author of *The Ultimate History of Video Games* (2001, Three Rivers Press), a *Mr. Do!* conversion kit came with a "customized control panel, a computer board with *Mr. Do!* read-only memory (ROM) chips, stickers that could be placed on the side of stand-up arcade machines for art, and a plastic marquee."

Conversion kits, which were used even by such companies as Nintendo, allowed arcade operators to save money by repurposing older, less fashionable machines that were collecting dust, cheaply turning them into bright and shiny new games. By former Universal Sales western regional sales manager Joe Morici's account, Universal, a company unrelated to the modern media giant, sold more than 30,000 *Mr. Do!* conversion kits—an impressive number indeed.

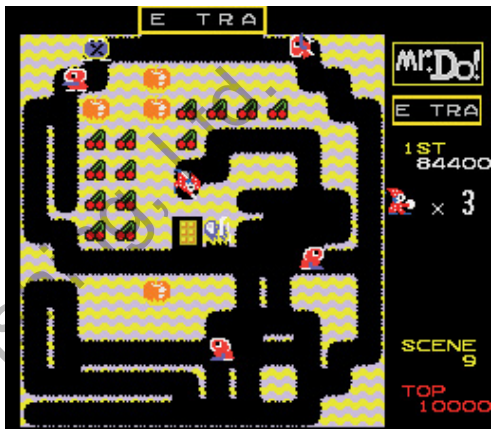
Mr. Do! was the seventh-highest-earning title of 1983, appearing in many more arcades in North America than *Dig Dug*. According to *Play Meter Magazine*, the game also beat *Q*bert*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, *Super Pac-Man*, *Moon Patrol*, *Donkey Kong Jr.*, and *BurgerTime* for that year (while falling short of *Pole Position*, *Star Trek*, *Gyruss*, *Time Pilot*, *Popeye*, and *Joust*).

Moreover, *Mr. Do!* started the conversion kit trend that helped keep the arcade industry afloat during a tough time, post-1982. While many sources incorrectly report that *Mr. Do!* was the first conversion kit, it was the first *commercially successful* conversion kit, popularizing the phenomenon in the process.

For those of you who have never played either the arcade or SNES version, *Mr. Do!* is one of the most strategy-intensive maze games of all time, with players digging their own trails (à la *Dig Dug*) instead of following predetermined pathways. You control the clown of the title as he digs tunnels and gobbles rows of cherries. Eating cherries plays the "do-re-mi" scale, and eating a grouping of eight cherries in succession grants gamers extra points. Mr. Do also avoids and throws a power ball at the strange, cartoonish, dinosaur-like enemies that prowl the maze in hot pursuit, similar to the ghosts in *Pac-Man*.

As Mr. Do digs tunnels he alters the maze, meaning the game is different each time you play (compounding this is that enemies will sometimes transform into monsters that can dig tunnels as well). After he throws the ball and kills an enemy, the ball will reappear in his hands a few seconds later. If the ball gets stuck in limbo, bouncing around the orchard somewhere without hitting an enemy, Mr. Do must retrieve the ball himself, which can create a lot of nervous excitement.

A more lucrative, more strategic way to kill enemies is to have Mr. Do walk under apples to drop them on top of enemies—killing multiple monsters with a single apple is a good way to score tons of points. Unlike the rocks in *Dig Dug*, which serve a similar purpose, the apples can be pushed along the floors of the maze pathways. One strategy is to dig traps for the monsters and push apples on top of them.



Near the center of each maze lies a food item, which when eaten brings forth an Alphamonster and his henchmen (who can eat apples). Killing Alphamonsters, each of which contains a letter, can eventually spell out EXTRA, granting players an additional life, playing a cutscene, and advancing the game to the next maze (an Alphamonster also appears on the playfield with each 5,000 points scored).

Level progression otherwise requires eating all the cherries (which gives the game a bit of a *Pac-Man* vibe), killing all the enemies, or grabbing a sparkling diamond that will occasionally pop up. Picking up this rare, randomly appearing gemstone scores bonus points, awards players with an extra credit on the machine (in the arcade version), and plays a perky rendition of the popular English lullaby "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

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Despite the fact that a joystick is more ideally suited for controlling maze games than a d-pad, the Super Nintendo version of *Mr. Do!* is an excellent port. You might think this is a given, considering the power of the 16-bit console relative to arcade games of the early 1980s, but if you've ever played the SNES version of *Frogger*, which is TERRIBLE, you know these things can be botched.

Regarding the SNES game's Battle Mode, I love playing it with my son, Ryan. We enjoyed it together when he was little, and still fire it up on occasion when he comes over to the house. This highly competitive, highly entertaining mode has the same type of tunnel-digging, monster-avoiding, cherry-gobbling gameplay, but it pits a blue Mr. Do against a pink Mr. Do (or should that be Ms. Do?), since they can shoot magic balls at one another. Not only is this mode great competition, it's good for lots of laughs. You can agree to cooperate to try to progress in the game, but the temptation to shoot one another is strong.

The arcade version of *Mr. Do!* was designed by Kazutoshi Ueda, who also created *Lady Bug* for Universal. The game inspired three very different, relatively obscure coin-op sequels: *Mr. Do!'s Castle*, an awesome nonscrolling climbing/platform game; *Mr. Do!'s Wild Ride*, a strange game where Mr. Do walks around and climbs on a rollercoaster; and *Do! Run Run*, an unusual maze title where Mr. Do gathers dots, throws balls at enemies, and closes off sections of the playfield.

In 1997, Visco developed *Neo Mr. Do!* for SNK's Neo Geo MVS system.

Despite being historically important and commercially successful, and despite being ported to several consoles and computers, *Mr. Do!* never became a household name. If you know a casual gamer who has never played (or even heard of) *Mr. Do!*, introductions are in order. Your friend will thank you for turning them on to one of the all-time greats.

FUN FACT:

Mr. Do! was ported to the Game Boy with scrolling screens to show the entire maze. That version also featured moving diamonds.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Mr. Do! is my favorite video game of all time, and the Super Nintendo version is an excellent port with a supplemental two-player Battle Mode, so of course it's going to make the cut. Sure, Mr. Do! is comparatively primitive to the other titles featured in these pages, but it's super fun, loaded with strategies, and infinitely replayable. It's easy to pick up and play but hard to put down—I've spent hundreds of hours on the game and don't regret a single second.

—Brett Weiss

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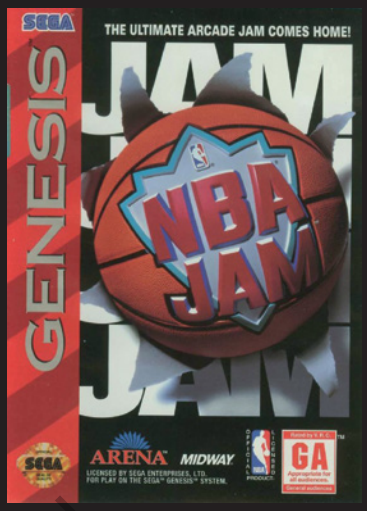
CHAPTER 47

NBA JAM

SUPER NINTENDO / SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SPORTS/BASKETBALL
PUBLISHER: ARENA ENTERTAINMENT (GENESIS); ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT (SUPER NINTENDO)
DEVELOPER: MIDWAY (GENESIS); IGUANA ENTERTAINMENT (SUPER NINTENDO)
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994



NBA Jam is one of the greatest arcade games of all time. An incredibly fun two-on-two basketball showcase released in 1993, the coin-op generated more than a billion dollars in quarters while wowing the gaming world with its graphically amazing depictions of real NBA players; high-flying, physics-defying dunks; and numerous hidden secret players. The game's boisterous catch phrases such as "He's on fire!" and "Boomshakalaka!" pushed their way into the general lexicon.

It also quickly knocked *Street Fighter II* off its pedestal as my favorite arcade excitement, and indeed, I loved *NBA Jam* so much that I even cold-called lead programmer Mark Turmell at his office at Williams Electronics just to tell him how amazing I thought it was. He picked up the phone and we had a lengthy conversation—definitely a thrill for the 14-year-old kid I was at the time! Over the years my enjoyment of the game has hardly abated; recently, I purchased the retro-inspired Arcade1Up version of the cabinet, featuring a pixel-perfect version of the original classic along with the sequels *NBA Jam: Tournament Edition* and *NBA Hangtime*.

Of course, a game this popular left little doubt that it would be ported to numerous consoles, and in 1994 it landed simultaneously on the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis, along with the Sega Game Gear, Nintendo Game Boy, and Sega CD. These latter three conversions occurred on a smaller scale, due to the limitations of the portable systems and the relatively less common hardware of the Sega CD. But the largely identical twin ports to the SNES and Genesis stood out overwhelmingly both in quality and popularity, each selling more than a million copies, and deserving dual acclaim as console classics of the sports genre.

Why? First and foremost, the SNES and Genesis versions faithfully replicate the winning features that made the arcade original so captivating. Naturally, the 16-bit systems' computing prowess can't quite match that of the more advanced arcade processor, but the gameplay results are amazingly close. Players are instantly recognizable by their faces, animations are silky smooth without slowdowns, and the game features the same assortment of incredible dunks, crisp music and sound effects, and entertainingly fun on-court basketball dynamics. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, far too many arcade standouts suffered from disappointing console conversions, and *NBA Jam* demonstrated that even the most graphically advanced and feature-enhanced coin-ops could indeed successfully transition to living rooms.

In fact, the console ports actually offered some improvements. Arcade *NBA Jam* features players from

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the 1992–1993 season, and the home versions update this to the then-current 1993–1994 campaign. Further, the game's Rolodex of secret player characters took a quantum leap in name recognition. The arcade version sneaks in 13 hidden playable characters in addition to the NBA stars, mostly members of the development team such as Mark Turmell, Jamie Rivett, and Sal DiVita. The SNES and Genesis cartridges included household personalities such as President Bill Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, NFL quarterback Warren Moon, and musician George "P-Funk" Clinton. Well-known celebrities had never before been featured in video games in such a purely hidden manner, and discovering how to unlock and play as them was super entertaining. *NBA Jam*'s sequel *Tournament Edition* would greatly expand on this and offer even more secret characters, from Prince Charles to Will Smith to the fictional fighter Reptile from *Mortal Kombat*. But the original game had clearly set the tone.

Beyond even this, though, the home versions of *NBA Jam* outright broadened for their core audience (e.g., 1990s teenagers like myself) the notion of what a home cartridge could actually achieve. Sure, we had played excellent home sports games such as *Tecmo Bowl* and *Double Dribble* on the NES, as well as incredible arcade re-creations such as *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat* on the Genesis and SNES. But *NBA Jam* rolled back the perceived limitations of console games like nothing else we had ever experienced. It had simply seemed unfathomable that our own TV screens could reasonably replicate the game's hyperrealistic versions of our favorite NBA players, especially since they so often stretch that reality to perform unbelievably gravity-defying dunks and launch into incredibly animation-intensive nonstop movements after hitting three consecutive buckets and catching "on fire." *NBA Jam* at home was as mesmerizing as a video game got, and in retrospect its $50 price tag was an amazing bargain considering how often my friends and I played it and how rapidly the arcade version had munched our quarters.

Mark Turmell and his team knew it too, as he shared in a 2020 video interview with Ars Technica:

> *NBA Jam* costs fifty cents per period, two dollars for a full game. Of course, we wanted players to play it all the way out. But [we noticed that] if they were ahead by, say, seven points at the end of the first quarter, we would not get them to pay that extra fifty cents. If they were behind by seven points, they would quit and maybe start over from the start, choose a different team. And so that led us to CPU assistance . . . it was really important for us to rubber-band the scores back and forth to make sure that it was a competitive match. We didn't want players to run ahead [and] we didn't want players to fall way behind, because we knew we'd lose money in that circumstance. And so we created this idea of the on-fire mode. And on-fire changed everything. We allowed the player to start heating up after he made two shots. The third shot he would catch on fire—his ball would have flames on it, he would burn the hoop, and he would shoot like 99% [on] three-point shots. He could goal-tend on the defensive end, and it changed the strategy of the game dramatically, because now, when you started to heat up, or your teammate recognized that you were heating up, they were trying to feed you the ball, because it had to be a streak for that one consistent player. When an opponent was heating up, you stopped trying to take three-point shots—you wanted to go in there and score, do an easy dunk. If your opponent was already on fire, you certainly didn't want to go down and take a three-point shot, because he could goal-tend your shot and get away with a legal goal tend. So you would change your strategy to go in there and knock somebody down and do a simple dunk, which extinguishes the fire. So the on-fire mode became the solution for the disparity of scores and to let people come from behind, and it layered in the strategy that we really didn't even anticipate. The key lesson that I learned right off the bat from *NBA Jam* was that a competitive game was magic.

Magic indeed, and while it may have begun with the arcade version, it clearly carried over to the home ports as well. My friends and I just couldn't get enough, and neither could millions of our fellow gamers across the country.

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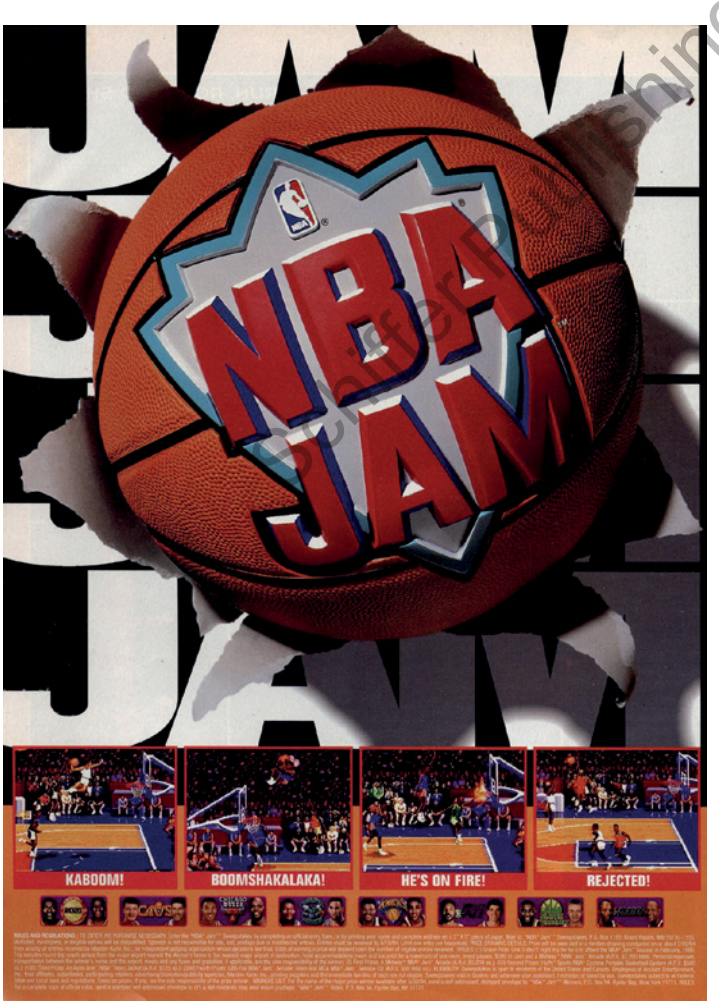
FUN FACT:

As a hard-core Detroit Pistons fan, programmer Mark Turmell secretly tweaked the game's code so the Pistons' shooting percentage would rise toward the end of any close matchups against their division archrival Chicago Bulls.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

NBA Jam was the greatest arcade-style sports game of its era and still holds up incredibly well to this day. Its console family tree has spread far and wide, with sequels both direct (NBA Jam: Tournament Edition) and by influence (College Slam) peppering home systems for years afterward.

—Shane Stein, executive producer of Adventures in Game Chasing



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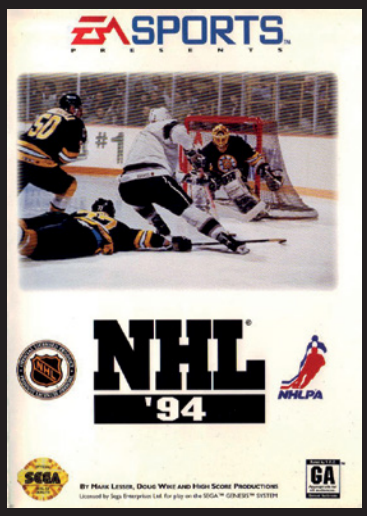
CHAPTER 48

NHL '94



SEGA GENESIS
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEVELOPER: HIGH SCORE PRODUCTIONS
GENRE: SPORTS/HOCKEY
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

They say not to present your opinion when writing something of journalistic merit, but saying that *NHL '94* is the most influential and greatest hockey game of all time is not opinion; it's a fact. That's not to say there haven't been amazing hockey games before its release, or after, but none have the legacy of *NHL '94*.

More than 25 years since its initial release, *NHL* '94 is still modded by homebrewers with updated rosters and ratings. Electronic Arts even released their own updated version of *NHL* '94 for the 2021 season as a preorder bonus for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of *NHL 21*. That pretty much says it all. While later NHL games have added other amazing features to the gameplay mix over the years (*NHL Faceoff '97*'s Icon passing and the introduction of the Skill Stick in *NHL 08*, for example), even those visually sexier games lack the accessibility and sheer fun factor of *NHL '94*.

To understand why *NHL '94* is so special, you have to understand the genesis (pun intended) of the series. Without real players, *NHL Hockey* on the Sega Genesis / Mega Drive was a wonderful version of the sport. The top-down view, the sense of speed, the fun. It was the best hockey game ever released up until that point, even if it featured only the numbers of the real players, but not their names. The next year *NHLPA 93* hit the virtual ice, this time without an NHL license, but with real players. This changed everything. The game played pretty much the same and added the Tampa Bay Lightning and Ottawa Senators, making it a cartridge that featured the entire NHL.

While the absence of fighting will always dim the *NHL '94* legacy a bit (no game is perfect, after all), the game is special in part because it added a feature that forever changed the hockey video game genre—the one-timer. Allowing a player to shoot as he accepted a pass—one of the coolest things done in a real hockey game—elevated EA's product to never-before-seen levels. For the first time, even in pixelated 16-bit form, the game felt like the real thing. The players knew. The fans knew. This was the beginning of the NHL empire and a sign of what EA was capable of doing with every professional sport—and they did.

Sure, *Madden* and *FIFA* get all the love today—but how many games introduced players to a sport for the first time? Nothing against *FIFA* and *Madden*, but if you don't like soccer and football, you're probably not going to play them in video game form. No way. There are just too many rules in soccer, and football is even worse. The speed and fun of hockey, however, absolutely lends itself to the video game art form. While the recent games in the series are more realistic than ever (I'll leave it up to you if that's a good thing or a bad thing), *NHL '94* was a game that hard-core fans of the sport adored and casual fans or newbies could absolutely find themselves immersed in. Again, how many games can say that?

Simply put, *NHL '94* was a love letter to professional hockey. For someone like me, who grew up reading the yearly NHL almanac and went on to cover professional hockey as a journalist, it was a way for an 11-year-old to see and feel how every player in the league played. From the hard snapshots of Al Iafrate to the smooth skating of Wayne Gretzky, *NHL* '94 allowed you to connect to the sport in no other way prior. Still to this day, I know what my New York Islanders in the game are capable of—that Pierre Turgeon by himself can change the outcome of a game, but I'm so much better with Jeremy Roenick and the Blackhawks, especially if I'm playing someone who has some skills (insert laughter here).

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In a day and age now where even mediocre players are rated more than a 75 in *NHL 21*, the original creators of the series had far-bigger marbles and weren't scared to rate players low. Just ask Dennis Vaske, the former Islanders defenseman, who's rated a 38 in *NHL '94*, or Tony Twist, the tough guy (forever immortalized in the *Spawn* comic book series as a villain) who is rated a 33 and can barely skate in the game but can check a cow off the ice. While arcane today, those player ratings got people thinking more about sports games than ever before. Some people still argue them today.

Igor Kuperman, the Winnipeg Jets' director of hockey information, created the ratings for *NHLPA Hockey '93* and *NHL '94*. In an interview published on si.com, he spoke about the process.

> I had to rate players in 12 categories, such as accuracy, shot power, checking, passing ability, and fighting, on a scale of zero to six. I also had to figure out who was on the first power play, second power play, first penalty killing unit, and second penalty killing unit.

Michael Brook, who produced *NHL Hockey*, *NHLPA Hockey '93*, and *NHL '94* and designed *NHL '95*, added that he "took Igor's ratings as a guideline and converted them from a zero-to-six rating to a rating out of 100, using additional information and stats, and included a random factor."

After the game was released, Kuperman got in a little trouble with Tie Domi. "He always grilled me why his *NHL '94* ratings were lower than Bob Probert's," he said.

In that same interview, Brook spoke a bit about the inspiration behind the series, which began with 1991's *NHL Hockey*: "The idea was we were going to convert the *Madden* model to the NHL to play a hockey game. . . . I grew up in Philadelphia in the 1970s, so, as you can imagine, I was a fan of the Broad Street Bullies. That actually had quite an influence on the game. If there was a brand of hockey I was trying to build into the game, it was more like the Flyers than the Soviet Olympic team."

But away from its origins, the sexy one-timers, the full NHL license, and full team rosters and player ratings, *NHL '94* reigned supreme for another reason: it had a soul. Each team played like one. Each arena felt like home to the player. It didn't need anything sensationalized from the video game world—anything that was "super" or "mega." It was just a damn good hockey sim for the people that loved it most, and a great game for anyone who wanted to know what all the fuss was about. If the game was a person, you could even say this: *NHL '94* wasn't out to make any friends; it was out to create a fun and fluid game of hockey that presented the league as it was then, fast and fierce.

Even without fighting, *NHL '94* is one of the greatest sports games ever created, and a game every player must experience before their game is over.

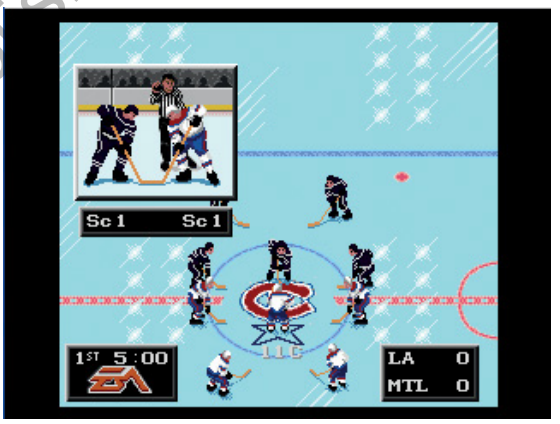
FUN FACT:

After the release of NHL '94, the NHL Players Association argued to have ratings of players changed so no player could be rated lower than 60.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Thanks in part to the innovation of the one-timer, as well as gameplay that holds up incredibly well, NHL '94 is arguably the most beloved hockey video game ever released.

—Patrick Hickey Jr., author of The Minds Behind the Games book series



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CHAPTER 49

NINJA GAIDEN

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / HACK-AND-SLASH
PUBLISHER: TECMO
DEVELOPER: TECMO
1 PLAYER
1989

If someone says "NES Hard," this is one of the games that immediately comes to mind. *Ninja Gaiden* is iconic, but man is it difficult. Despite (or because of) the vaunted difficulty level, this hack-and-slash platformer is a timeless classic, often mentioned on "best of" lists for the NES.

Like a lot of arcade ports at the time, the home version bears little resemblance to its arcade counterpart, which was a *Double Dragon*–style brawler released in 1988. Aside from the blue ninja that you control in the one-player mode in the arcade, the familiar-looking "Cola" signs in the first stage, and the Jason Voorhees look-alikes that you fight, there isn't much to connect the two games.

As the protagonist Ryu Hayabusa, you are an agile ninja who moves with fluidity, speed, and grace. You'll run, crouch, climb (ladders), flip, and jump (including wall-spring jumps and wall-spring climbing jumps) your way through treacherous caves, icy cliffs, foreboding temples, and other venues of nonstop action. There are 20 areas in all spread over six acts (levels): Destiny, The Escape, The Chase, A Trap, Life or Death Combat, and The Fall of the Demon. Ryu battles enemies with quick sword thrusts, and he can slash lamps and other objects to reveal such pickups as points, spiritual strength, and the following weapons: throwing stars, windmill throwing stars, time freezes, a jump-and-slash technique, and an invincible fire wheel that rotates around Ryu.

Storywise, the game didn't break any new ground. Ryu is the last in the line of the Dragon Clan of Ninjas. Your adventure starts when you discover a note left by your father, Ken Hayabusa. In said note, you discover that he has been killed in a duel and that you need to take the Dragon Sword of your family's clan to America to seek out your father's friend, archeologist Walter Smith.

In addition to battling baddies, you meet a CIA agent named Irene Lew, save the world, get betrayed by the people who hired you to save the world, and fall in love. A fairly standard story overall. However, it's *how* the story is told that is groundbreaking. Today, cutscenes in video games are standard fair. In fact, we might think it odd if a modern game that wasn't retro-inspired DIDN'T have them. But when *Ninja Gaiden* came to our shores in 1989, it was the first time many of us had seen anything like it. The only comparable game at the time in terms of cutscenes was *Golgo 13: Top Secret Episode*, released on the NES the previous year, but that game didn't have as big an impact as *Ninja Gaiden*. Dubbed "Cinema Display" by Tecmo (they also referred to their games that employed this as "Tecmo Theater"), the game played out more like a movie than did most other titles.

Another aspect that drew people to *Ninja Gaiden* was America's obsession with ninjas. During the '80s, from movies to toys to cartoons, you couldn't swing a sword without hitting a ninja. In fact, this phenomenon is what prompted Tecmo to make the game in the first place. According to a developer reunion interview published on Polygon (www.polygon.com), Yoshihito Kakihara, the president of Tecmo at the time, noticed the ninja fad in America and wanted to capitalize on it. He said, "In America, people kind of saw ninjas as modern-day superheroes," something that he had a

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hard time grasping, since in Japan ninjas were seen merely as historical figures. "Making a game in modern day with ninjas seemed to be a bit of a contradiction," he continued. Even though he described the idea as being a bit "awkward," the team, comprising director Hideo Yoshizawa, artist and writer Masato Kato, and composer Keiji Yamagishi, kept working together to make something that "wasn't a historical piece and not a superhero game."

As referenced earlier, *Ninja Gaiden* is a chore to beat (to put it mildly). One of the more notorious aspects of the game is that if you die in any of the three phases of the final boss rush, you are sent all the way back to the very beginning of the stage, instead of the beginning of the area that you were just in. In the Polygon interview, Yoshizawa explained the reason for this. "That actually wasn't my intention," he said. "I wanted to put players back in the middle of the stage. But one of the programmers lied to me and said he'd do that, then ended up putting them back at the beginning."

Another aspect of the game that adds to the difficulty for a lot of people is that they tend to hang on to the subweapons that they like the most. According to Yoshizawa, that wasn't how the game is supposed to be played. He said they developed the game "with the intent that the player should use items shortly after they get them, and if they do that, the game isn't that hard because the items are designed to help with certain enemies." He went on to say that "they realized that there are some players who don't use items right away and want to save them for the end. If you do that, you pretty much can't win. It becomes a very difficult game."

The music also stands out as highly memorable. Ironically, Keiji Yamagishi told Polygon that he never intended to work in video games, that he "fell into an interview when Kakihara found out that he was in a band, and demanded that he join the company." Luckily for us, he did indeed join Tecmo and went on to compose one of the more memorable soundtracks on the NES. The music is always upbeat and fits the mood for whatever is happening on screen. Whether it's something mysterious occurring in a cutscene, or while you are charging headfirst into an onslaught of enemies through the Amazon, the music always feels just right. There's even a way to unlock the game's soundtrack at the title screen of the game, one of the first instances of being able to do a sound check in a game.

From a groundbreaking way to tell a story, to insane difficulty, to an unforgettable soundtrack, to fun platforming and hack-and-slash action, *Ninja Gaiden* is truly a classic that not only captures a moment in time in American culture but also lives on due to its outstanding quality.

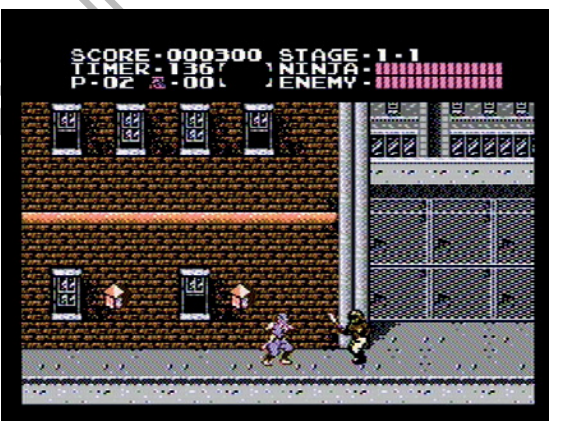
FUN FACT:

If you have struggled with this game for years and years, don't feel too bad. The game's director, Hideo Yoshizawa, said that the game's difficulty was so hard that during the bug-checking process, many of the team members basically cried while trying to finish it.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The original Ninja Gaiden trilogy on the NES stands out as exceptional 8-bit gaming, and it got off to a great start with the original title. It's hard but engaging, cinematic but action packed, and compelling in terms of every reviewable category, including gameplay, graphics, and music.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming-4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast



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CHAPTER 50

PANZER DRAGOON II ZWEI

SEGA SATURN
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON 3-D SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: TEAM ANDROMEDA
1 PLAYER
1996

While the surprise Saturn console launch was an unmitigated disaster for reasons that have been discussed to death in the pages of gaming magazines and in every corner of the internet, there were a few gems hidden among the ashes of Sega's reputation on that fateful May day in 1995.

When we learned the Saturn was "out there," my roommates and I tracked down a rental immediately, and since no one really owned a system yet, that rental came with every launch game on the roster. Of course we were excited to play the marquee games—*Virtua Fighter* and *Daytona* were the first two discs to spin in that borrowed Saturn. And we were sufficiently impressed. They weren't arcade perfect, but both games managed to retain the spirit of their coin-op counterparts, and of course the extra horsepower of the system was evident to those of us who'd recently played only 3-D console games on the Super Nintendo and Sega 32X.

But we kind of knew what to expect from those. The rest of the launch games were a mystery to us, with no frame of reference to draw assumptions from other than a few small magazine articles. So, when we finally fired up the original *Panzer Dragoon* for the first time—this rail shooter that looked great in screenshots—I don't think we were fully prepared for how breathtaking it was. Not only was it a first-rate shooter with solid gameplay mechanics, but it took place in a wonderfully realized world that felt as though it had a rich history. Not to mention a gorgeous soundtrack to tie the whole thing together.

It seemed just about perfect to me at the time, right up until the release of *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei*. Not that the first game had any major flaws, but *Panzer Dragoon II* demonstrated the brilliance to be found when a great idea is allowed to grow and evolve. It's better than the original game in almost every way.

Panzer Dragoon centers on the story of a boy struggling to survive in a postapocalyptic world, when he stumbles upon an ancient structure and right into the middle of a massive battle between two dragons. One of the dragon's riders is fatally wounded, and just before death he hands his weapon and dragon off to the boy. Thus begins their adventure.

Panzer Dragoon II Zwei is an origin story. Our hero Lundi lives in a simple, superstitious village that seems to thrive on raising small pack animals called khourieats. Every so often, one of these khourieats is born with a mutation—a small blue glow in their throats. These are seen as a bad omen, a reminder of an ancient cataclysm, and thus are euthanized while they are still young. All except one. Lundi's compassion has led him to hide a khourieat, who has not only this glowing throat but another mutation: wings. Unable to bring himself to kill the young khourieat, Lundi instead raises it in secret, naming it Lagi, believing it to possibly be a dragon, which could fulfill Lundi's lifelong dream of being a dragon rider like the ones he read of in legends.

A year later, while out attempting to get Lagi to fly, Lundi's village is leveled by a squad of airships. As the two stand over the burning village, watching the attackers fly away, the light in Lagi's throat builds into a charge of energy that fires into the sky. And then the game begins.

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The basic mechanics of *Panzer Dragoon II* are largely the same as its predecessor. As you ride Lagi through each level, you can fire your handgun or lock on to a limited number of enemies to unleash her homing laser attack. This is a rail shooter, so when enemies approach from the side or behind, tap a shoulder button to rotate your focus and shoot them before they shoot you.

But those are just the basics. *Panzer Dragoon II* brings so much more to the party. Lagi's arsenal now includes a berserk attack that, when unleashed, basically fires a barrage of homing lasers at everything nearby. It's also possible to take alternate paths through some of the game's levels. You're still stuck on a particular rail, but there's a bit of extra variety here.

More importantly, though, Lagi actually evolves throughout *Panzer Dragoon II*. She's landlocked for the first couple of levels of the game, since the intro established that she hasn't yet gained the ability to fly. But that comes soon enough, on the basis of changes she undergoes due to a few different performance variables tracked during each level. You get points for clearing each stage, taking more-difficult routes when available and based on the ratio of enemies you shot down during the stage. Evolving makes Lagi tougher and able to lock on to more enemies. It's even possible to ultimately evolve into the blue dragon form seen in the original game.

Yes, Lagi is in fact the dragon you ride in the original *Panzer Dragoon*. *Zwei* is her origin story, though it's not clear whether Lundi is the dragon rider who dies during the opening cinema of the first game.

The Saturn truly struggled in its first year on the market and never really recovered. But it was also an extremely creative time for Sega as a home game developer. *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei* is a wonderful example of just how good its internal developers were at their craft. Take the surprise best game of the system's launch and create something even more rich, robust, and beautiful in just a year? Amazing! And even more so when you realize that for much of the development cycle, some of the *Panzer Dragoon* team was also working on *Panzer Dragoon Saga* simultaneously. What a bunch of rock stars!

In an interview with USGamer (www.usgamer.net), *Panzer Dragoon* series creator Yukio Futatsugi spoke about the teamwork of the design staff. "One thing that really stuck with me with the team that we had was everyone was really unique, and they had their own quirks of course," he said. "But we really had this atmosphere where we could talk about anything. If there was something that needed to be talked about, we could just hash it out. That's what I remember most about the team."

In that same interview, art director Kentaro Yoshida added, "I remember it as being a pretty fun experience. At the time when it was this small group, it was about half arcade veterans from the Sega arcade team and half brand-new folks like me and Futatsugi-san. It was a challenge to ourselves to prove that we could work just as hard as the people who had been there for a long time."

And that hard work certainly shows with a game like *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei*.

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FUN FACT:

Before beginning work on Panzer Dragoon, creator Yukio Futatsugi was given the option of making either a racing game or a shooting game for the Saturn. Before he'd made his decision, driving game Gale Racer was green-lit, and so he was forced to develop a shooter. Thank goodness!

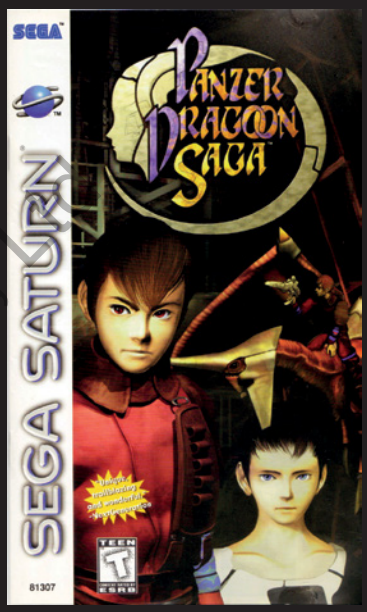
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Panzer Dragoon II Zwei takes everything that was great about the first game and amps it up. The year 1996 was a great one in terms of high-quality titles for the Saturn, and Zwei stands near the top of the pile of amazing games released at that time.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

CHAPTER 51

PANZER DRAGOON SAGA



SEGA SATURN
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON 3-D ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: TEAM ANDROMEDA
1 PLAYER
1998

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Employees at Sega of America in the late '90s must have suffered a serious case of whiplash. Imagine being there in 1994! You're working for one of the most successful console manufacturers around—the place that finally broke Nintendo's stranglehold on the console market, ready to unleash its 32-bit monster on legions of fans who are hotly anticipating what's next.

Fast-forward three years, and Sega is falling apart. The Saturn, despite some spectacular games, is a huge failure, coming a distant third in a three-horse race. There hasn't been a game starring a blue hedgehog from Sonic Team in four years. The few fans you have left are fleeing the proverbial sinking ship after your chief operating officer told them the Saturn is not Sega's future a full two years before the Dreamcast will even hit the market. The company has shrunk from more than 2,000 employees to something like 200. And then one of the greatest games you've ever seen comes across your desk for localization and testing.

And while this particular story is about *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, sadly it can be applied to just about any big Sega game that year. Other Saturn releases in 1998 included *The House of the Dead*, *Shining Force III*, and *Burning Rangers*. All four released to very little fanfare, and almost nothing in the way of marketing support on a dying system in the same year everyone was going berserk for games such as *Tekken 3*, *Metal Gear Solid*, and *Resident Evil 2* on the PlayStation. Or *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* on the Nintendo 64. It's no wonder people call *Panzer Dragoon Saga* the best RPG you've never played.

But in this case that's barely hyperbole. After all, there were reportedly just more than 20,000 copies of *Panzer Dragoon Saga* released in North America, meaning

it's very expensive in the collector's market. Plus, with Saturn emulation being so difficult and the unfortunate loss of the game's source code, a remake or port to a modern system has never happened and is unlikely to anytime soon.

Sega's Team Andromeda began work on *Panzer Dragoon Saga* at the same time as *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei*. Gamers had responded so positively to the rich world that existed on the periphery of the first game that producer Yoji Ishii suggested that the team create a role-playing game so that players could explore the land further. It was such a great idea that the team decided they would create a fully 3-D world complete with rendered video cinemas and fully voiced characters. That doesn't sound too far-fetched today, but in 1995 the console RPG world was still experiencing 2-D games such as *Chrono Trigger*, *Phantasy Star IV*, and *Suikoden*. A fully 3-D world was a whole other level of complexity.

Unfortunately, development took a lot longer than was hoped, and was fraught with misfortune, including the death of two team members (one in a motorcycle accident, one by suicide). *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, which it was hoped would compete with Square's *Final Fantasy VII* both in quality and sales, took more than three years to develop.

On the quality front, Team Andromeda definitely delivered. *Panzer Dragoon Saga* can hold its armored head high compared to Square Soft's world-conquering PlayStation RPG. *Panzer Dragoon* not only features a compelling story that expands on the already beloved lore of the first two games in the series, but manages to do so in a way that somehow keeps the massive genre shift from rail shooter to RPG from feeling jarring in any way.

That's mostly down to the battle engine. While fights in *Panzer Dragoon Saga* definitely maintain an element of the active-time battle style popularized by the *Final Fantasy* series in recent years, it's fused expertly with a real-time flight system that sees your dragon and rider constantly jockeying with monsters for the most advantageous position in the sky. Players are presented with a radar readout that can be used to move to one of four color-coded quadrants that encircle their enemies. If the dragon happens to be positioned in a transparent quadrant, damage by both heroes and monsters will be standard. Position yourself in a red quadrant and prepare for massive damage from your enemies, while green quadrants mean you cannot be attacked.

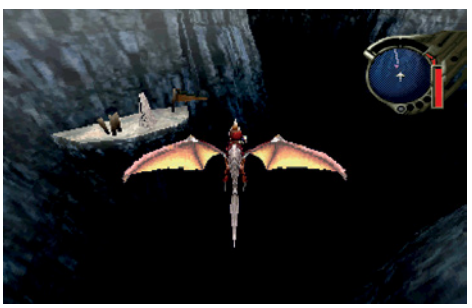
Layered on top of this setup is the fact that many enemies in the game feature weak spots that are not necessarily visible when your dragon is in a safe quadrant. Plus, your enemies are constantly shifting position. Oh, and anytime you decide to move, your power bar (essentially an Active Time Battle bar) stops charging while you're in motion.

It sounds complicated, but it's all very elegant in practice. Much like its two predecessors, the dragon can attack multiple targets at once by using homing lasers, and the rider a single target with his gun, along with special attacks that are governed by the three-level power bar.

Even more brilliant is how Team Andromeda chose to handle the idea of the party of heroes that had become a staple of the RPG genre by the early nineties. *Panzer Dragoon Saga* features a single playable rider and his dragon, which keeps the story nice and neat but takes away from the variety provided by a party filled with tanks, magic users, nimble thieves, etc. But your dragon can morph into basic analogs of these archetypes, changing the way you tackle battles and the abilities available to you.

Panzer Dragoon Saga is wholly unique. There was nothing like it before, and there's been nothing like it since. It's not unusual to hear the term "classic" thrown around for a game this rare in spite of its actual quality, but in this case the moniker absolutely fits. And it's so fitting that its late release meant that the Panzer Dragoon series bookended the doomed Saturn's life span so perfectly. A series that is truly of the console. *Panzer Dragoon Saga* city designer Jina Ishiwatari Tsukahara put it beautifully in a 2018 interview for Polygon.com:

> I thought that it was such a uniquely "Sega" game. Sega's hardware was always popular among the more hardcore gamers. Fans of the Saturn were always hardcore fans. The Saturn was distinctly not a Nintendo or Sony product, and *PDS* was not the type of game Nintendo or Sony would release. I think every member of the development team felt that way. So, in some sense, *PDS* was a game that could have only been made on the Sega Saturn.



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FUN FACT:

The EU version of Panzer Dragoon Saga is in extremely limited supply . . . except for the first disc, which was included as a premium in the May 1998 issue of Sega Saturn Magazine. What a bonus!

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Panzer Dragoon Saga is an all-time-great RPG with the unlikeliest of pedigrees built by a bunch of developers who completed the project by sheer force of will. There's nothing like it on any other system.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

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CHAPTER 52

PHANTASY STAR IV

SEGA GENESIS
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ROLE-PLAYING GAME
1 PLAYER
1995

The Super Nintendo is viewed as the place to go for Japanese RPGs. After all, it has *Final Fantasy*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Breath of Fire*, and numerous other all-time classics. However, the Genesis shouldn't be discounted, because Sega's Phantasy Star franchise ranks right up there with the greats.

The series has its origins on the Sega Master System. While Nintendo was puzzling over whether American children would understand games such as *Dragon Quest*, Sega had no problem localizing the inaugural entry of their sci-fi series in 1988. It stars a young woman named Alis taking revenge on a despotic king for the death of her brother, whose adventures send her across the three planets of the Algol star system. Along the way she's joined by tough guy Odin and sorcerer Noah, as well as a large, talking cat named Myau. It's one of the most gorgeous games of the 8-bit era, with a bright, anime *Star Wars* aesthetic and gigantic, fully animated enemy sprites. Its inclusion of science fiction elements made it a bit different from others, since characters wielded magic along with laser guns.

Phantasy Star had quite the all-star development cast, with many going on to enjoy renowned careers at Sega, including Kotaro Hayashida, who was the head designer on *Alex Kidd in Miracle World*; Naoto Ohshima and Yuji Naka, both prominent members of Sonic Team; Rieko Kodama, an artist who would later become a producer of many Sega RPGs; and Tokuhiko Uwabo, a composer and sound director of many 8- and 16-bit titles.

Alas, relatively few people owned the Master System, particularly in North America and Japan, so *Phantasy Star* flew under the radar. It saw a little more success when it moved to the Genesis, with the second and third entries finding some measure of acclaim. But it's the fourth (and final) entry of the core series that's the culmination of everything that came before it.

Phantasy Star IV, which is called *Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium* on the title screen, begins with a pair of bounty hunters—the experienced Alys and her underling Chaz—investigating a mysterious outbreak of mutants. Their party increases in size, as it does with most RPGs, with the inclusion of Hahn, a meek scientist; Rune, a legendary magician with connections to the heroes of the past games; Gryz, a warrior of the Motavian race who looks like a large, adorable, fuzzy bird; Rika, an elf-like artificial human reminiscent of Nei from *Phantasy Star II*; Demi and Wren, a pair of cyborgs; Raja, a priest with a goofy sense of humor; Kyra, a psychic; and Seth, a mysterious archeologist. Their adventures eventually send the heroes up against Dark Force, the recurring antagonist of the series.

There are plenty of tragic twists and surprising turns throughout the story, which moves at a brisk pace, with seldom any downtime between events. Characters move quickly and battles are resolved quickly, especially compared to other 16-bit RPGs. The game was criticized at the time of its release for being too easy, but that only means it's much more approachable from a modern perspective, since there's rarely any busy work.

Indeed, for as excellent as the original *Phantasy Star* is, it holds closely to 8-bit RPG design conventions, such as uneven difficulty and repetitive grinding. And while *Phantasy Star II* moved to a 16-bit platform, it was still rooted in the style of the time, using the extra cartridge space to include expansive mazes that are a tremendous slog. *Phantasy Star III* was controversial at

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the time, since it featured a story that focused on a royal family over three generations but eschewed many of the aesthetic and plot elements that gave the series its identity. *Phantasy Star IV* is conscious of all of this, so it keeps what made the series so beloved while smoothing out its rough spots.

The plot ties in with major elements of the previous games, even though it takes place a thousand years after the previous ones. For example, *Phantasy Star II* saw the destruction of the planet Palma; *Phantasy Star IV* lets you visit its shattered remains. Alis, the heroine in the first game, is viewed as a legendary hero, and while Myau (or any of his kind) isn't playable this time around, the descendants of his Musk Cat race can still be found. King Lassic, the big bad of the first game, is even brought back from the dead for our heroes to contend with.

The only sore spot lies with the English localization. The writing itself is pretty good, especially compared to other RPGs of the era, but it incorrectly translates some of the connections between the previous entries (and even adds some that didn't exist before), so players may need to refer to a guide to fully understand everything. To be fair, many of its issues also stem from inconsistencies from the previous English versions. Even if you haven't played the other *Phantasy Star* games, it's still an excellent experience.

Phantasy Star IV also looks and sounds spectacular. Throughout the story there are regular cutscenes filled with richly detailed manga-style panels, which were common in CD games of the era but were an extravagance on cartridges. The soundtrack is one of the best of the Genesis, with a rich score that includes intense battle themes, memorable town songs, and plenty of catchy dungeon tracks, some of which are remixes from older games. The FM synthesis may sound a little harsh compared to the sampled music sound in SNES games, but it gives it a distinctly edgier feel suitable for its futuristic setting.

Sega wasn't kidding when they deemed this to be the last entry in the mainline series. The *Phantasy Star* name was resurrected for their Online series, which began on the Dreamcast in 2000 and continues 20 years later, but outside of some small story connections and references they're completely different types of games.

The first two *Phantasy Star* games received remakes for the PlayStation 2 in Japan, with revamped visuals and sound. The story was fleshed out a bit, but the games lacked the charm of their forebears. *Phantasy Star IV* never got the same treatment, but it's kept alive, along with the other Genesis games, on many other compilations available on modern platforms. Sega's RPG lineage continued with a few other games produced by Rieko Kodama, including the Dreamcast/GameCube game *Skies of Arcadia*, a cult classic focusing on sky pirates, and *7th Dragon*, a dragon-busting series that remained Japan-only until its final installment for the 3DS.

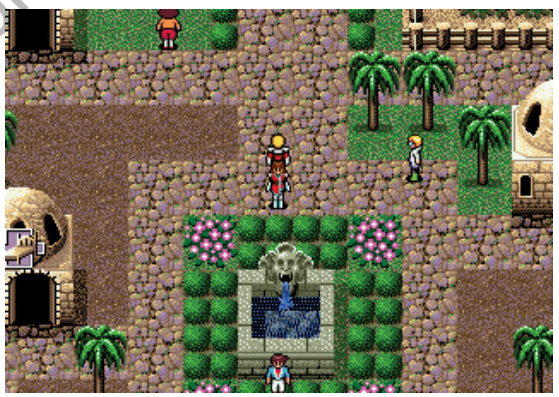
FUN FACT:

The North American / European cover artwork is by famed fantasy artist Boris Vallejo. It's a nice illustration, but the characters only vaguely resemble their in-game counterparts! The Japanese version was by Hitoshi Yoneda, who also provided the cover art for the previous Mega Drive entries.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Phantasy Star IV has everything that made 16-bit RPGs great: a gripping story, excellent visuals (with a charming early '90s anime sci-fi aesthetic), a stellar soundtrack, and a fast and exciting battle system.

—Kurt Kalata, video game historian



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CHAPTER 53

RESIDENT EVIL

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: SURVIVAL HORROR
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1996

If you are new to the Resident Evil franchise, you shouldn't put off playing the first game, despite the fact that the series has come a long way in terms of graphics, sounds, and gameplay. While the debut outing is sometimes criticized for its awkward controls and clumsy dialogue ("It might be handy if you, the Master of Unlocking, take it with you"), it's a bona fide classic for a reason, terrifying video game veterans and noobs alike for more than 25 years. All this time later the game remains highly playable, thanks to its haunting atmosphere, tricky puzzles, tight design, fun shooting action, and iconic monsters.

In summer 1998, a grizzly wave of murders strikes the midwestern town of Raccoon City. Investigations show that the victims were torn apart as though eaten by wild animals. This grizzly phenomenon appears to be emanating from an old mansion deep in the woods. The Raccoon City Police Department's Bravo Team of S.T.A.R.S.—the Special Tactics and Rescue Service—was sent to investigate but have since gone radio silent.

When Alpha Team goes to recover their fellow teammates, they find a downed chopper and are attacked by savage dogs that have flesh rotting off them. Remaining team members Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine escape to the nearby mansion but quickly discover the nightmare has only just begun. With limited supplies and an army of zombies and monsters to contend with, the remaining S.T.A.R.S. members must solve the puzzles and navigate the deadly traps of the Spencer Mansion not only to uncover the origins of the horrific creatures, but also to simply survive.

An important game both historically and in terms of fun factor, *Resident Evil*, along with such titles as *Sweet Home* (1989) and *Alone in the Dark* (1992), helped kick-start the survival horror genre. In fact, the first use of the term "survival horror" was in describing the original Japanese release of *Resident Evil*. Throughout the course of the game you'll accumulate weapons such as shotguns, bazookas, and a magnum, but ammo is scarce. Healing items are in short supply as well. To succeed in the game, you must carefully consider when to fight and when to bypass the moaning zombies that are clogging the claustrophobic hallways of the mansion and its surrounding areas. Failure will put you face to face with the "YOU DIED" screen and force you to go back to the last time you saved. Saving is also limited, because to do so you must consume an ink ribbon inventory item at one of the many typewriters you can find throughout the mansion.

Though quaint by today's standards, *Resident Evil* helped push story and presentation forward in video games. Opening with a spooky live-action cutscene (which was made in black and white and sanitized for the North American release but is still effective), *Resident Evil* showed just how good video games as a medium could be in communicating a horror-themed narrative. It's hard not to laugh at some of the recorded dialogue ("It's a weapon; it's really powerful, especially against living things."), but the game was created during an era where such things were still being figured out. The game actually makes you feel empathy for the creatures you're pumping bullets into when you read the many diaries strewn about that speak of the biological weapon known as the T-Virus that made them this way.

Cinematic presentation is not just limited to story beats, but also during the action. *Resident Evil* uses

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prerendered backdrops and fixed camera angles to further build tension. There's nothing quite as unsettling as hearing a click of an apelike Hunter's claws on the ground or the guttural scream of a zombie without being able to see them. This also plays into *Resident Evil*'s divisive controls. When navigating the world, you use what are affectionately (or derisively, depending on whom you ask) known as "tank controls." Essentially you move forward by pushing forward and go in reverse by holding back. And you can go right and left. This can change depending on the angle, and it takes some getting used to, but it further cements the fact that this experience is not meant to be a flat-out action shooter and instead must be played slow and methodically.

Resident Evil features two protagonists (Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine), each of whom come with their own strengths and weaknesses. Chris is considered the harder route, since he can hold only six items, cannot gain access to the powerful bazooka, and needs special keys to open drawers. Jill, on the other hand, has a lock pick, can hold eight items, and can bypass certain puzzles with the help of a fellow S.T.A.R.S. member. However, she does take more damage when attacked.

No matter which character you choose, each hero takes the same basic journey, but they will encounter characters along the way that the other won't. Chris, for example, will meet up with the last surviving Bravo Team member, Rebecca Chambers, while Jill will explore with fellow Alpha squad mate Barry Burton. The actions that you take will determine who lives and dies, ultimately reflecting in your final ending. Those with fast-enough times can unlock powerful weapons with unlimited ammo. *Resident Evil* is not a particularly long game, but there's lots here to keep you coming back.

Resident Evil was widely praised upon release, including by *Electronic Gaming Monthly* scribe Mike Desmond, who, in his 9.0/10 review in the May 1996 issue, said, "When first looking at *Resident Evil*, one might think it is an *Alone in the Dark* wannabe, but they are very wrong. *RE* is a great game from start to finish, providing the gamer with a cool plot, realistic sound effects, and graphics that will blow you away." The *Alone in the Dark* comparison was further emphasized by *EGM*'s Sushi-X, who, like Mike, gave the game at 9.0/10. He stated, "*RE*, at first glance, may appear to be a clone of *Alone in the Dark*, but in reality, it is a totally new experience where the player must fight for his or her own life in a horrifying setting."

Popular *Resident Evil* content creator The Sphere Hunter concluded her review of *Resident Evil* in the video titled *Resident Evil: The Birth of Survival Horror—Enter the Survival Horror Part 1* with "the game is almost perfect, featuring really polished gameplay with so much replay ability. *Resident Evil* is an amazing gaming experience that everyone should have."

Comparisons with *Alone in the Dark* are certainly understandable, as even Resident Evil series father Shinji Mikami acknowledges. In an interview with the YouTube channel Archipel he said, "Honestly, when I saw *Alone in the Dark*, I thought the project could become a reality if we went this way. My first plan was to make *Resident Evil 1* a first-person game. I wanted to pursue that plan, but Capcom was inexperienced with 3-D; we weren't able to put on screen the graphics that I had in mind. I thought we could prerender the backgrounds to make it work. However, that meant we had to apply tank controls. It's something that we couldn't solve by the time the game was due. In the end, many players told me that they thought that view is what made the game scarier."

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Despite its sometimes unintentionally funny dialogue and clunky control scheme, and the fact that the series has progressed substantially beyond its origins, the original *Resident Evil* is an iconic game of thrills, chills, mysteries, puzzles, and slow-burn action that every gamer should experience.

FUN FACT:

UK developer HotGen Studios created and nearly finished a Resident Evil port for the Game Boy Color, but it was canceled.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Resident Evil popularized the survival horror genre, inspiring games such as Parasite Eve. It kick-started a multibillion-dollar franchise that has crossed over into toys, books, comics, and a series of live-action films. Not only that, it remains scary and a heck of a lot of fun all these years later.

—Blair Farrell, owner and content generator for Comic Book Video Games (comicbookvideogames.com), author of The Web of Spider-Man Games: The Amazing and the (Not So) Spectacular

CHAPTER 54

RESIDENT EVIL 2

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: SURVIVAL HORROR
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1998

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Fate had a cruel way of keeping me away from the Resident Evil franchise for several years. During one holiday season, my brother nearly got a copy of the first game on PC until we were advised by a store clerk that our machine couldn't run it. When renting a PlayStation console at one point, we tried to get *Resident Evil 2* with it, but the store clerk working that day was hesitant to give it to us because they had only one disc and not two. Sadly, they didn't know that all you really needed was the one.

I became aware of *Resident Evil* after seeing the games and merchandise in *Wizard* magazine, but I didn't know exactly what it was, only that it was big. I was happy then to pick up the E3-coverage-packed summer issues of *Nintendo Power*, where I found out that Capcom would finally be bringing the second chapter to the Nintendo 64. Finally I could find out what the PlayStation-owning community was raving about.

The first time I plugged a rented copy of *Resident Evil 2* into my Nintendo 64, it was a transformative experience. After years of enjoying mostly family-friendly games on Nintendo's platforms, here I was playing a title where I was afraid to turn a corner because of what might be on the other side. I recall my dad getting a good laugh at one point when I jumped out of my chair when a zombie dog, known as a Cerberus, leaped at a cell door to produce a loud "CLANG" sound.

From that point on, I went from someone who knew little about *Resident Evil* to a man obsessed with the series. I spent my Christmas money in 1999 securing a copy of *Resident Evil 2* for the N64 and played it throughout the year 2000, probably every week. I

eventually grabbed the PlayStation original as well, and I discovered that while the PS1 version has clearer sound and better movies, the N64 port is impressive, since it compresses all the data onto a cartridge with sharper character models, and there's an option to play without tank controls.

As my affection for the franchise grew, the shelves in my tiny bedroom became populated with plastic re-creations of my favorite *Resident Evil* characters. I read the novelizations about as quickly as I could get them. And I'm sure my parents "loved" the poster on my wall proclaiming, "EVERYONE'S GONNA DIE," referencing some of the final words from a character in the game.

I'm far from the only person who was profoundly affected by *Resident Evil 2*. After its early 1998 release, it went on to sell millions of copies and was ported to other systems. *Resident Evil 2* is a great example of how to do a sequel right, improving substantially on the already stellar original and expanding the universe in ways fans couldn't begin to imagine.

Mere months after the happenings of the first game, Raccoon City has become an apocalyptic nightmare due to an outbreak of the Umbrella Corporation's T-Virus. This information is unbeknown to Leon S. Kennedy, a rookie police officer reporting for his first day of duty, and Claire Redfield, the sister of Chris Redfield from *Resident Evil*, who's in town seeking her whereabouts.

Fate brought the two together but just as quickly pulls them apart. Seeking refuge in the Raccoon City Police Department, the duo realize it is no safe haven, and find themselves caught up with other survivors linked to an even more volatile mutagenic toxin known as the G-Virus.

Resident Evil 2 uses the same tank controls coupled with prerendered backgrounds and fixed camera angles as the first title. It improves on the formula in several significant ways, however. The script and acting are much improved, and computer-generated cinematics replace live action. Zombies are more aggressive, and not only are there more types of them, but more appear on screen at any given time. Though ammo is once again scarce, weapons such as the pistol, shotgun, and magnum can be enhanced with parts and are joined by a submachine gun, among a few others.

The biggest improvement in *Resident Evil 2* is in how it handles its dual protagonists, in what would become known as the "Zapping" system. Instead of Leon and Claire going on a mostly similar journey, the two traverse familiar areas while having their stories intersect at key moments. If you start as Claire, she'll run into Leon while chasing after a young girl named Sherry Birkin. When you finish her story, you unlock a "B" scenario with Leon where you'll see how he got into the room where they meet.

What this means is that *Resident Evil 2* is effectively four games in one, with both characters having an "A" and "B" scenario to play through. To see the true conclusion, the player must navigate both paths to see the real final encounter. In the "B" story, the protagonists will also be hunted by the iconic black-trench-coat-clad creature known as Mr. X. They're dropped into the police station to search for the G-Virus and terminate any remaining survivors, and they can be only briefly slowed down by your weapons.

The story in *Resident Evil 2* is far more elegantly told than that of the first in how it links the player characters and further fleshes out the universe. Not only do you have Claire, who's a blood relative of Chris, but also the introduction of the mysterious Ada Wong, who is only briefly mentioned via a file in the lab area of the original *Resident Evil*.

On top of the four campaigns there's also a bonus mode where you play as an Umbrella operative known only as Hunk, who must navigate a series of enemies with a limited set of tools and ammunition. For those who complete Hunk's mission and are looking for an even-greater challenge, there's the Tofu Survivor mode. Here players must complete everything they did as Hunk, but this time as a white rectangular block who wields nothing but a knife. Completing the game with fast times and few saves rewards you with powerful weapons that have unlimited ammunition, and a rerelease of the game introduced yet another mode dubbed "Extreme Battle," where Chris Redfield makes an appearance.

As with the premier outing, *Resident Evil 2* released to much critical acclaim, even going as far as to win over those who didn't care for the original. In the March 1998 issue of *Electronic Game Monthly*, Dan "Shoe" Hsu wrote in his 9.5/10 review, "It sucks you in with its excellent graphics and creepy atmosphere—I played it for hours before realizing it was almost time for me to go to work . . . *the next morning*." EGM's Kraig Kujawa similarly scored it and said, "If any software developer wants to see how a sequel should be done they should look at this game. I didn't like the first *RE*, but I absolutely adored this one."

In her Enter the Survival Horror series on YouTube, The Sphere Hunter proclaimed, "*Resident Evil 2* is an incredible game that managed to improve upon everything that was introduced in the original *Resident Evil*, and that game was almost perfect."

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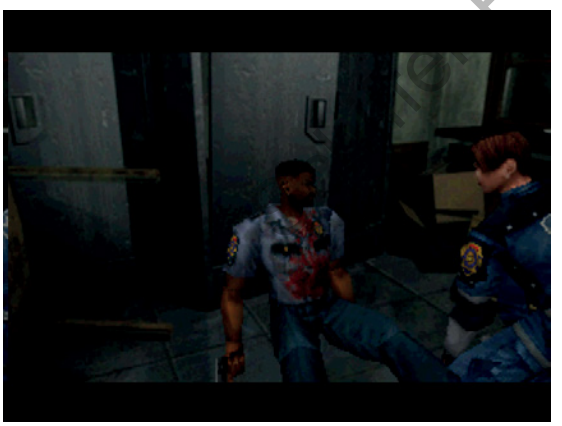

Even though *Resident Evil 2* has gone on to become a classic and beloved by many, its development did not go smoothly. A build of the game that was close to being finished was scrapped, forcing the development team to start over. In an archived interview on Shmupulations, Nobura Sugimura, a writer brought on to evaluate the original build, said, "It was all too realistic. The ominous atmosphere from the first game, as represented in things like the Spencer Mansion itself, the armor room, key items like the jewelry box and gemstones . . . all that had been removed . . . doesn't feel like *Resident Evil*. . . . Of course, wiping the slate clean and going back to zero on a project that's already 70% complete is no mean feat, and in that sense, I think it was a very brave move on the part of the developers."

The game's acclaimed director, Hideki Kamiya, agreed. In an excerpt from Alex Aniel's *An Itchy, Tasty History of Resident Evil: 1994–2006 (Vol. 1)* (2021, Unbound), he said, "To be honest, I was actually relieved when we canceled the game. . . . It was my first time sitting in the director's seat so I was quite inexperienced. I like to experiment with different ideas to see what works and what does not. Another thing that contributed to the failure of the game was my lack of vision. I do not usually have a specific vision going into a project. I like to experiment and see what sticks."

In 2019, Capcom remade *Resident Evil 2* for a new generation of gamers. It was reimagined from the ground up but stayed faithful to its roots and was widely praised by the gaming press. Whether you play the original or the remake, I can almost guarantee that you're going to love *Resident Evil 2*.

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FUN FACT:

Resident Evil 2 came on two discs, but it was possible to fit it onto one. It was spread across two CDs because the team miscalculated its final audio data size algorithm.

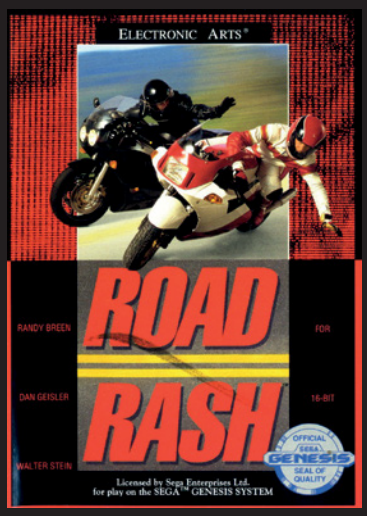
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Resident Evil 2 takes the formula established by the first game and builds on it tremendously. The way the two stories interweave is pure genius, and it's not hard to see why this is still considered by many to be one of the best entries in the series.

—Blair Farrell, owner and content generator for Comic Book Video Games (comicbookvideogames.com), author of The Web of Spider-Man Games: The Amazing and the (Not So) Spectacular

CHAPTER 55

ROAD RASH



SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: DEMOLITION / COMBAT / MOTORCYCLE RACING
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
1 PLAYER
1991

Ah, *Road Rash*. Of all the Electronics Arts (EA) franchises that fans have long clamored for a modern-day sequel to, and lord knows there are many—*Desert Strike*, *SSX*, *Wing Commander*, *Command & Conquer*, and *Dead Space* all say hello—*Road Rash* usually tops the list. And with good reason. When the game was introduced in 1991 it was wholly unique in the market thanks to its combination of brutal hand-to-hand combat and white-knuckle racing gameplay, a formula that could be just as remarkable and welcome in the modern day. Over 20 years since the last Road Rash release, there's nothing that has come close to doing it justice on today's platforms.

Sure, in recent years fans have admirably taken matters into their own hands and released their own spiritual successors such as *Road Redemption* and *Road Rage*, but none had the backing of EA and the support to deliver something worthy of the *Road Rash* legacy. To its credit, EA has tried to reboot the franchise at least twice: once with its North West studio (formerly Studio 33, which had previously worked on *Destruction Derby* and *Formula One* titles as part of Psygnosis) and again with a concept of "Burnout versus Road Rash" being kicked around by Criterion. (Criterion originally put bikes into *Burnout Paradise* as a test to see how they would handle for *Road Rash*.) Sadly, neither came to fruition. Series codesigner Dan Geisler tried and failed to get funding for a revival of his own that was to be called *Hard Rider*. As such, we're left looking to the past for the pinnacles of motorcycle combat racing, all the while imagining what a true successor could be like.

The Road Rash series had several notable entries, with many favoring *Road Rash II* for its improvements over the original (such as a proper two-player split-screen mode) or *Road Rash* for the 3DO, which offered digitized graphics, full-motion video, and a licensed grunge soundtrack. But for me, the original Genesis game still holds the fondest place in my heart. It released at a pivotal time, when the Genesis was really coming into its own in terms of original software, most notably with *Sonic the Hedgehog* debuting a few months earlier.

For Sega fans, *Road Rash* represented a strong counter to the Super Nintendo and its racer *F-Zero,* both of which hit the States the month prior. Its unfettered violence also bolstered Sega's argument for "Genesis does what Nintendon't" while Nintendo attempted to preserve its squeaky-clean image. For me, as a teen at the time, a 16-bit superbike game featuring illegal road races filled with violent combat and the ability to outrun the cops was just . . . well, truly badass. My friends and I loved it.

In a 2007 interview published on Sega-16 (www.sega-16.com), former EA producer Mike Wallis was asked if he and the team at Electronic Arts had been worried about the public perception of and any fallout over the violence in *Road Rash*:

> At that time there really wasn't a "violence in video games" discussion. The graphics were marginal, colors limited, and they certainly weren't perceived by any reasonable person as being "lifelike." Therefore, I doubt there was concern internally that *Road Rash* was going to be a PR nightmare. The game violence was more comical than anything, since nobody ever died or was injured. If you were knocked off your bike you just got right back on.

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There was no other racer like it at the time, but it wasn't just the thrill of riding and hitting opponents with chains or bats. *Road Rash* had personality. There was an entire cast of characters that you'd race against, each with their own backstories, banter, and racing styles. Police officers that you'd encounter also had individual attitudes. Heck, even the bikes you'd purchase had their own distinct character and damage meters of their own. It all felt like so much more than your average sim or arcade racer.

Road Rash also offered a fantastic sense of risk/reward as you played. You could speed through an intersection and pray to not get sideswiped by traffic, or you could enter cautiously and lose time. You could tussle with a cop and try to get away, or you could try to keep driving and hope you didn't hit anything and risk getting caught. Levels would consistently place you in predicaments requiring snap judgments and a bit of luck.

One of the coolest things about *Road Rash* was that it was entertaining even while punishing you. Producer Randy Breen was influenced by cartoons such as "Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner," where it was fun to watch the villain repeatedly getting tossed around and beat up. This set up scenes such as getting flung from your bike and, while running back over to it, seeing it knocked even farther down the road by another car. Or getting smacked head on by oncoming traffic as you were avoiding obstacles in your lane, not knowing what was ahead on the other side of a hill. The game's long stretches of California highways, with twists and turns and rolling hills, meant that players were always on their toes as obstacles suddenly came into view.

Despite having only five (albeit lengthy and varied) stages, *Road Rash* offered a fair amount of depth and progression as players earned cash from successful races. Winnings could be used to purchase new bikes with different speeds and capabilities, pay for bike repairs, or cover fines if you were apprehended by the police. This too made it feel like much more than your average racer.

FUN FACT:

The game's name came from producer Randy Breen's own experience riding his motorcycle on Mulholland Drive, thinking to himself that someone would get some serious "road rash" if they happened to wipe out on the hilly curves. In fact, the game was originally pitched to EA as Road Rash on Mulholland Drive before the name was later shortened.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

In an era before Grand Theft Auto, the thrill of riding superbikes at breakneck speeds while outrunning the police and trading blows with others felt so radical. Road Rash helped define the Genesis, and it remains a formula that is begging to be done justice in the modern era.

—Sam Kennedy, 1UP.com cofounder and former editorial director, cofounder and executive producer at Tigertron

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CHAPTER 56

ROCK N' ROLL RACING

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: DEMOLITION / COMBAT RACING
PUBLISHER: INTERPLAY PRODUCTIONS
DEVELOPER: SILICON & SYNAPSE
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

A cult classic vehicular combat game, *Rock N' Roll Racing* is reminiscent of *R.C. Pro-Am* (Nintendo, 1988) but with the notable addition of weapons and the accompaniment of a killer classic-rock soundtrack.

Taking place in the distant future across several planets outside our solar system, *Rock N' Roll Racing* is more than just your run-of-the-mill racer; it's an all-out war. Each race is run with four drivers vying for the top spot in their customizable racing machines, including monster trucks, muscle cars, and hovercraft, among others. The overarching goal is do well enough in each planet's individual racing leagues to gain enough points to advance to the next, with the ultimate goal being the interplanetary championship title.

Gaining experience points means your driver can move on to the next series with even-greater stakes, where the enemies become incrementally more aggressive, faster, and better equipped to take you out. Good thing you have access to the same upgrades and modifications as your opponents!

Rock N' Roll Racing starts you off with a limited selection of vehicles but allows you to purchase newer, better vehicles as you earn money through your racing career. Those vehicles can be retrofitted with better performance parts (shock absorbers, engines, tires, armor, etc.) and gadgets (oil slicks, nitro boosts, etc.), as well as an arsenal of weapons intended to damage the other drivers (mines, oil slicks, rockets, etc.). How you outfit your car can make or break your career, so choose wisely. Failure to build a strong-enough or fast-enough car will eventually earn you an early retirement.

Two-player head-to-head races are where this game really shines. Given the overt aggressiveness of *Rock N' Roll Racing*, don't be surprised if the competition leads to strained relationships. If you thought *Super Mario Kart*'s projectiles were annoying, nothing compares to the unparalleled agony of getting hit by an opponent's missile FROM ACROSS THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COURSE just before you cross the finish line!

The racing segments are presented on circuit courses from an isometric view. Vehicles are controlled in a manner similar to real-life radio-controlled cars—pushing left or right on the controller's directional pad turns the car in that direction relevant to the car's perspective. It takes a short time to get used to, but it can feel a tad wonky at first. If that isn't your cup of tea, the SNES controller's left and right shoulder buttons can also be used to make your vehicle steer accordingly. Once you get the hang of it, the game handles like a dream.

Rock N' Roll Racing was originally intended to be the sequel to 1991's *RPM Racing*. Just prior to the end of the project, Interplay Productions secured the licensing rights to a handful of timeless classic-rock songs, and thus the rockin' title was born. The songs included "Highway Star" by Deep Purple, "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath, "Bad to the Bone" by George Thorogood and the Destroyers, "Born to Be Wild" by Steppenwolf, and "Peter Gunn" by Henry Mancini—which interestingly makes *Rock N' Roll Racing* the second vehicular combat game to feature the Peter Gunn theme song after its use in *Spy Hunter* (Bally Midway, 1983).

By 1993, gaming consoles had become increasingly capable of producing much-higher-quality musical

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elements than in years past. Powered by Sony's S-SMP audio subsystem chip, the SNES version of *Rock N' Roll Racing* did more than just emulate these songs; it produced convincing instrumental re-creations of them. So yes, *Rock N' Roll Racing* actually does rock! And it does it well!

As the game's title boasts, much can be said for *Rock N' Roll Racing*'s soundtrack. It must have been an interesting discussion at Silicon & Synapse's conference room table when someone suggested incorporating rock tracks recorded between 1958 and 1982 into a 1993 game marketed toward preteens. Thankfully, they (rock 'n') rolled with it, because I'm pretty sure I first heard Deep Purple's "Highway Star" in *Rock N' Roll Racing* before ever hearing the actual band's recording.

Voice actor and motorsports announcer Larry "Supermouth" Huffman provides digitized vocal commentary with such quips as "The stage is set! The green flag drops!" at the start of a race or semihelpful hints such as "[Your driver] should avoid mines!" if you happen to blow yourself up by driving over one. Larry's commentary paired with a stellar soundtrack and explosive effects makes *Rock N' Roll Racing* one of the best-sounding games of the 16-bit era. Sega Genesis fans received their own version of the game in 1994. The port added Golden Earring's "Radar Love" to the rotation, but the game received mixed reviews in comparison to the SNES original, which *Electronic Gaming Monthly* awarded "Best Driving Game of 1993."

With a colorful array of selectable characters, each with their own attributes, *Rock N' Roll Racing* formed the basis of inspiration for future titles such as *Twisted Metal* (Sony, 1995) and *Vigilante 8* (Activision, 1998). Players choose from a decent selection of colorful drivers such as the Fabio-looking Snake Sanders; Cyberhawk, the Robocop/SilverHawks hybrid; Ivanzypher, who looks like a distant relative of Chewbacca; Tarquinn, the wannabe Vulcan; and more.

The cartridge utilizes a password system for saving the player's progress (as opposed to an internal backup battery), with passwords consisting of 12 alphanumeric characters. This is a nice feature because it will likely take you more than a single sitting to play through the game.

At the end of the day, *Rock N' Roll Racing* more than justly chisels its name into the annals of video game history. Superbly designed and deftly executed, the racer provides the knockdown, drag-out, vehicular-chaos escapism romp we never knew we needed but were ever so thankful we got.

FUN FACT:

Rock N' Roll Racing was developed by Silicon & Synapse. Don't recognize that name? They later became Blizzard Entertainment. That name should probably ring a Divine Bell. In an interview published on news.blizzard.com, Sam "Samwise" Didier, the longtime senior art director at Blizzard Entertainment, spoke about the game's influence on the company: "We pushed it from a normal racing game on boring dirt tracks to racing on inferno planets with aliens blasting away at you. That was just the birth of what we did to all of our games—fantasy, sci-fi, and horror. We were having fun with it. We can do whatever we want, so let's just do it. That set the tone for future Blizzard games."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Rock N' Roll Racing is fun, plain and simple. My friends and I destroyed each other for hours playing the game! I'm not sure what originally lured me to the game as a kid, but I'm sure glad I stumbled upon it. The game wasn't a huge smash hit in terms of sales when compared to better-known SNES titles, but it certainly earned its place in terms of uniqueness and replayability.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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CHAPTER 57

R-TYPE

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: NEC
DEVELOPER: IREM / HUDSON SOFT
1 PLAYER
1989

Known as 2-D side-scrolling shooters, shoot-'em-ups, or even simply "shmups," whatever you call the genre, there's just something wonderfully enticing about the fantasy at the core of it all. It's the classic fighter pilot against all odds, outgunned and hopelessly outnumbered, the integration of human and machine in mechanized aerial combat on strange alien worlds, the determination to restore intergalactic peace through superior firepower. It's hardly Shakespeare, but it's the emergent narrative, the war stories romanticizing every shoot-'em-up player's best attempts to destroy countless enemy invaders and evade ridiculous amounts of plasma-charged flak while saving the entire universe from certain doom, that gives the genre its enduring substance and lasting appeal. *R-Type* for the TurboGrafx-16 is no exception, and while it may not have much in the way of a literal written story to tell, the game itself is part of a much-grander narrative, an integral character in the epic of the shmup genre as a whole.

The TurboGrafx-16 is renowned for its selection of 2-D side-scrolling shooters, and despite not being a true 16-bit machine, it was capable of some fairly impressive audiovisuals. With how popular the shooter genre was in arcades and on home consoles at the time, Irem's 1987 arcade hit was a natural fit for the PC Engine console (the TG16's Japanese counterpart). Hudson Soft developed and released a licensed port of the 16-bit arcade game for the PC Engine in 1988, originally contained on two separate game cards. The game was consolidated to a single higher-capacity card for the North American version, released more than a year later in November 1989. Still considered by many to be the most faithful port of the original arcade game available on any home console, *R-Type* is a phenomenal demonstration of the TG16's capabilities and its potential for bringing home near-arcade-quality ports of genuine quarter-munchers.

Many gamers who grew up during the '80s and '90s were aware of the TurboGrafx-16's existence only in passing, since most of us were too caught up in the highly publicized console war between Sega and Nintendo. I remember seeing the TG16 on display in a Toys "R" Us once as a kid, and I'd occasionally read about the machine and several of its games (including a review of *R-Type*) in a few gaming magazines. I remember dismissing it all, unfortunately, convinced that the system looked only marginally better than my NES and not as good as the recently released Sega Genesis. I remember seeing *Super R-Type* on the Super Nintendo shortly after its release and at the time being impressed with the graphics and audio.

It would be *decades* later, though, when I finally had the chance to actually play the original *R-Type* on a TurboGrafx-16. While I had certainly become far more familiar and appreciative of the PCE/TG16 over the years, I did a double-take as I watched the game in motion. Despite the hardware being technically inferior to true 16-bit platforms, there was something about the graphics and sound of *R-Type* running on the TG16 that I found more appealing and more aesthetically pleasing than higher-end versions of the game.

True, the game had less color depth and a lower screen resolution than either the original arcade game or *Super R-Type*, but there was something about the optimizations that lowered the visual "noise," creating a cleaner-looking, smoother-playing, purer gaming

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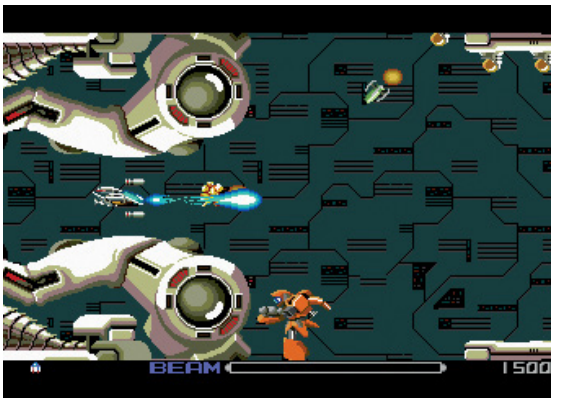
experience. There was the occasional bit of sprite flicker, but I found it far less distracting than the chronic slowdown seen on the SNES, and while the sound effects and music may not have had the sample rate of the SNES title, the TG16 audio was crisper and more consistent with the game's overall aesthetic. I was more than merely impressed; I was blown away and left feeling rather guilty about not having invested in the PC Engine / TurboGrafx-16 experience sooner as a gamer and collector.

R-Type's most iconic element is the spherical item carried around by the player's ship known as a Power Pod, which the player can use for everything from a battering ram to a shield, or even as a massive projectile weapon. The Power Pod can be attached to the front or rear of the player's ship (providing rearward covering fire), greatly enhancing the R-9 star fighter's primary weapons when attached, or it can be set free as an autonomous drone that provides additional fire support, albeit with slightly lower damage. Unlike the R-9 star fighter itself, though, the Power Pod is actually indestructible, completely invulnerable to enemy fire or collisions. The gameplay dynamics of the Power Pod are what help set *R-Type* apart from virtually every other title in its genre, providing a strategic depth in combat rarely seen in shoot-'em-ups.

Oddly enough, according to the original game's designer, the idea for the Power Pod and how the player interacts with it was actually inspired by a dung beetle rolling its horde. Other elements in the game, including architectural details and enemy designs, also take inspiration from organic or biological sources such as insects or bodily organs, giving the entire game a well-executed, and occasionally grotesque, biomechanical aesthetic.

As is the case with most shooters of its type (so to speak), *R-Type*'s story is little more than context, succinctly presented in a single line of text on the title screen that reads, "Blast off and strike the evil Bydo Empire!" As humanity's last hope against the invading alien race known as the Bydo Empire, you pilot the R-9 Nectarian Battle Cruiser through eight levels of biomechanical madness in space. The levels run a gamut of visual themes ranging from techno-industrial to a gory, sinewy alien graveyard to the interior of a massive supercomputer, and even a battle in a junkyard filled with the shattered hulls of your defeated enemies. Each stage ends in a spectacular encounter with one of the game's large and visually impressive bosses, including a final bout with the Bydo Emperor himself.

The port does a remarkable job of re-creating the arcade version's gameplay and overall presentation, but



because of the TG16's lower display resolution, the game features a small amount of vertical scrolling as the player approaches the top or bottom of the screen to fully display the entire height of the levels. It's a small compromise, but one that demonstrates the kind of thoughtfulness that went into this amazing game's optimization and technical execution.

R-Type for the TurboGrafx-16 has remained a revered title throughout the years since its original release. In December 1990, a consolidated version of the original Japanese port titled *R-Type Complete* was released exclusively for the PC Engine CD-ROM peripheral and included animated cutscenes. In December 2006, the TG16 port of *R-Type* was rereleased on the Nintendo Wii Virtual Console. It was also featured on the TG16 Mini console, released by Konami in 2020. Rereleases like these clearly indicate this game was never meant to be forgotten, nor should it ever be. Not only does *R-Type* rank among the best titles in the TurboGrafx-16 library, it is one of the best console shmups of all time. In short, it is a milestone in the history of arcade-to-home conversions.

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FUN FACT:

According to a 1987 interview with the original arcade game's development team in the Japanese gaming magazine Gamest, the "R" in R-Type stands for "ray," referring to the various ray-type energy weapons used by the R-9 star fighter.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

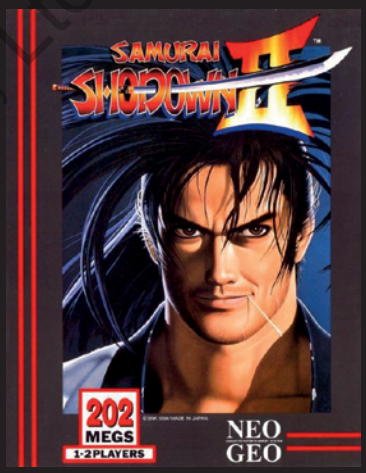
Heavily influenced by Konami's Gradius and Salamander series of shoot-'em-ups, and taking a great deal of inspiration from the artwork of legendary surrealist H. R. Giger, R-Type is the first entry in a long-running and much-beloved series known for its gameplay depth, level of difficulty, and iconic visuals. Though optimized for the slightly less powerful hardware's constraints, the TurboGrafx-16 port does an excellent job of authentically capturing the look and feel of the arcade game. It is a standout on a system that is home to many fantastic specimens of the 2-D side-scrolling shooter genre.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist

CHAPTER 58

SAMURAI SHODOWN II

NEO GEO
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: SNK
DEVELOPER: SNK
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994



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The booming arcade scene of the '90s and early 2000s was a paradise for gamers. Among the sea of brightly colored video games, few could match the raw competitive nature of the ubiquitous fighting game. This is where *Samurai Shodown II* made its mark, with combatants entering the ring armed with a unique weapon to engage in flashy and surprisingly gory combat. While *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat* laid the foundation for the genre, *Samurai Shodown II* was one of the first games to evolve the formula, since it popularized the weapons-based fighter.

Samurai Shodown II has a great feel that holds up today. The combat has an excellent sense of depth, using the four-button layout to its fullest potential. It expertly mimicked the 3×3 attack layout coined by Capcom's *Street Fighter II* by mapping the heavy slash to A+B and heavy kick to C+D. The movement is also nuanced, with dodge rolls, back jumps, and even the ability to break out into a sprint and dart around the screen.

Many of these were improvements over the original *Samurai Shodown*. In addition to evasive rolls, you could perform short hops backward or in place to evade low attacks. Another key defensive technique is the Sword Stun, a parry-style maneuver that would force your enemy to pause briefly if you blocked their attack at the last second before it connected. The most notable improvement was the addition of the Weapon-Breaking Technique.

Weapon-Breaking Techniques were the earliest form of super moves the franchise played with. When your character's Rage Gauge fills up, a command will

appear above it. If you execute the command, you will perform the devastating attack. If it connects, you'll destroy your opponent's weapon and force them to fight unarmed until the referee Kuroko can give them a spare.

Each fighter has their own weapon, with characters such as Nakoruru and Galford utilizing animal partners as well. Heavy slashes and heavy kicks deal huge amounts of damage, while light and medium attacks can be used to create combos and give yourself breathing room. This isn't to say that *Samurai Shodown II* is without 2-D fighting-game staples. Fireballs, grabs, and flying uppercuts are all here, with the robust movement options offering ways to get around it all. The fact that you can lose your weapon and be forced to fight hand to hand changes your battle tactics. This added layer of tense decision-making, along with lightning-fast gameplay, makes it a fighter that is still avidly played in competition to this day.

The frenzied fighting action is delivered in a beautifully colored package. Each character has an extravagant design, with many taking inspiration from Japanese culture. Characters such as Kyoshiro Senryu, the kabuki warrior, and the wandering samurai Haohmaru, the franchise protagonist, are prime examples of this. There are four new playable characters: Cham Cham, a cute, green-haired, boomerang-hurling cat girl; Genjuro Kibagami, a killer for hire who wields a katana; Caffeine Nicotine, an old monk who uses magic cards to summon mystical creatures; and Neinhalt Sieger, who punches foes with his giant metal gauntlet. These unorthodox combatants help give the game a fun and unique identity with a deceptively violent edge.

The clashes of steel during fights create a mounting tension, until it's broken by the sound of a blow connecting. Whether it be the thud of a kick or the rending of steel cutting flesh, the dynamic sounds of *Samurai Shodown II* make the intensity palpable. Weapon hits are emphasized by flashes of blood upon connecting, with heavy hits slowing the action down for dramatic effect. It makes each blow feel like it has weight, especially when landing the signature Weapon-Breaking Techniques and watching your opponent's weapon be destroyed after a KO.

It was the aesthetics of *Samurai Shodown II* that gripped my friends and me when we were kids. Neo Geo cabinets were already great choices for arcade gaming, since they usually housed more than one title, but *Samurai Shodown II* stood out among the rest. It had a more refined style and better, more detailed graphics than the original *Samurai Shodown*, with a huge cast of characters that were fun to learn. Unfortunately, the Neo Geo AES console was cost prohibitive, so we couldn't experience the action at home, but thankfully we could play the exact same game in nearly any arcade during that time.

The visual style of *Samurai Shodown II* broke boundaries for fighting games. The bright, colorful stylings of *Street Fighter II* and *Fatal Fury* were much different from the gory grit of *Mortal Kombat*. The game effectively merged these two styles into one that seamlessly respected the qualities of its historical inspirations. A sense of grace accompanied the graphic violence depicted in the game. This gave it a natural, approachable vibe when many competitors, such as *Darkstalkers*, pushed the eccentricity to the extreme in their designs with over-the-top transformations to complement their off-the-wall characters. The first *Samurai Shodown* laid the foundation for the franchise, but *Samurai Shodown II* cranked up the visuals and soundtrack to further cement its personality.

Samurai Shodown II is one of the more influential fighting games in history and a shining jewel of SNK. With a deep combat system and a roster of 17 fighters, the game feels surprisingly modern for a title released in 1994, and it's always a great choice for some quick sword-fighting action. Gameplay mechanics such as the Sword Stun transcend generations under different names such as Just Guard or Parrying that are staples in fighting-game design to this day. Being an all-around improvement over the original, *Samurai Shodown II* is a legendary game that managed to stand out when it could have been easily overlooked as nothing more than a cash-grab sequel, which it clearly wasn't.

In spite of its huge popularity, the game curiously stayed on Neo Geo hardware for nearly 10 years before moving to the more mainstream PlayStation console in Japan. The first physical release of the game to come stateside outside a Neo Geo platform was in 2009, as part of *Samurai Shodown Anthology* for the PS2, PSP, and Wii. The year prior it was released in digital form via Xbox Live Arcade.

Today, one can easily pick up *Samurai Shodown II* as part of 2020's *Samurai Shodown Collection*. The updated anthology released digitally on the PC, with a physical option available on the PlayStation 4 and the Nintendo Switch, each with online play.

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FUN FACT:

Each character in Samurai Shodown II has multiple win poses, each mapped to a certain direction on the joystick. This allows you to pick your favorite any time you'd like.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Samurai Shodown II is an electrifying representation of the fighting genre, whose deep combat mechanics and stylish visuals still influence modern game design.

—Thorne Stone, freelance writer and founder of clusterfuktmedia.com

CHAPTER 59

SECRET OF MANA

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT
DEVELOPER: SQUARE
1–3 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

Quick, name the game: A boy of unknown origin pulls a magical sword from a stone, marking the perilous beginning of his long journey to become a hero and save the world. *King Arthur* on the PlayStation 2? Try further back in time . . . but not quite thousands of years back, since this setup actually premiered on the Super Nintendo on August 6, 1993, as the opening scene to the wondrous adventure of *Secret of Mana*.

Originally released in Japan as *Seiken Densetsu 2*, *Secret of Mana* is a sequel to 1991's Game Boy outing *Seiken Densetsu*, known in America as *Final Fantasy Adventure* and a spin-off of the larger *Final Fantasy* series created by Square, the predecessor to today's juggernaut RPG publisher Square Enix. And while some question whether *Secret of Mana* truly is an RPG, given its action adventure elements, in my view, and with due respect to *Chrono Trigger*, *EarthBound*, and the *Final Fantasy* series itself, *Secret*

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of Mana is the greatest of RPGs, both on the Super Nintendo and in its era in general.

The hero's Arthurian intro quickly leads to a world besieged by monsters, since the act of taking the sword inadvertently unleashes evil forces heretofore kept in check by the legendary Mana Tree. Alas, the player must undertake a far-reaching and dangerous quest to discover the tree's hidden Mana seeds, which can restore its proper balance and rid the world of the newfound evil creatures. Along the way, adventures abound, such as joining with additional protagonists (a girl and a magic sprite, who are also playable characters); traversing a vast world of continents and islands on the back of a dragon; exploring dozens of castles, mazes, and underground passages; discovering an abundance of items, treasures, and hidden secrets; acquiring and mastering numerous weapons and magical spells; and facing ever stronger enemies as you advance through the journey. Just a few of the entertaining side quests, meanwhile, include defeating an evil empire, uncovering the secret of a modern-day Midas's city of gold, and even rescuing Santa Claus upon Rudolph's request.

I first encountered *Secret of Mana* at age 15, a few months after its American release, and became absolutely enthralled right from the get-go. It was actually the first fantasy-style game I had played in a while; I had loved *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, but my subsequent SNES experiences mostly revolved around action and sports: *Street Fighter II*, *Star Fox*, the Madden and NHL series, and not much else. So I was looking for a worthy adventurous successor, and *Secret of Mana* obliged in spades. Immediately evident were gorgeous graphics, catchy musical themes, thrilling action, and intriguing exploration, and these only grew as I delved further into the game. Then, having discovered the multiplayer function (which is not immediately apparent at the game's beginning), I hightailed over to my friend Brian's house and introduced him to the game, on which we spent pretty much every waking hour over the next couple of days. Eventually I had to go home, but he was so captivated that he insisted on borrowing the cartridge from me and returned it only after beating it a few weeks later!

In time I completed it as well and ultimately enjoyed it so much that I played it through again several times over the years. It just so happens that I reached out to Brian while writing this piece (we're still good friends to this day) to mention referencing him in it, and incredibly enough, he told me that he was literally in the midst of a current playthrough as well via the Super Nintendo Classic Edition console! Not so bad for a couple of guys now in our early 40s with busy careers and families!

What exactly is so great about *Secret of Mana*? Even beyond its impressive graphics, music, and adventure, the game is a stunning, spellbinding journey in which the characters and story line resonate with an emotional depth and impact like few games before or since. At times it will make you laugh, at times it will make you cry, and far beyond merely playing as these characters, you'll root for them, empathize with them, cheer them along their journey, celebrate the highs of making a positive difference in their world and commiserate the lows of villains trying to prevent that difference, and generally immerse yourself in their story the way you would your favorite novel or film.

The game also successfully achieves the delicate balance of satisfying both adventure fans seeking another *Zelda* and passionate RPG aficionados who live and die by the next *Final Fantasy* chapter. Just as with traditional RPGs, you continually build up your player character's hit points, magic points, and weapons proficiency throughout the quest. But instead of facing enemies via turn-based combat, you fight them in real time à la *A Link to the Past*, *Crystalis*, and most every other action adventure game out there.

This dynamic is enhanced through an innovative ring-style menu system for choosing weapons and other items, which effectively functions as though the core of a *Zelda*-style subscreen were circularly overlaid across the main screen when prompted. *Secret of Mana* requires many hours to complete, and while its structure is admittedly more linear than the most hard core of RPGs (especially those that began as computer games such as *Ultima* and *Wizardry* and their sequels), it nevertheless features plenty of gameplay variety to keep players excited and entertained for long stretches.

None of this was accidental. *Secret of Mana* director Koichi Ishii and producer/writer Hiromichi Tanaka knew they were attempting something fresh. From a 1993 interview in *Hippon Super* magazine:

> **Tanaka:** "We felt like mainstream RPGs had gotten kind of stale, only differing in the stories and scenarios they offer, but otherwise all having the same basic format . . . is ignoring the gameplay systems and just focusing on the story really the right way to go?"
> **Ishii:** "Neither *Dragon Quest* nor *Final Fantasy* have broken out of the frame originally imposed by command style RPGs . . . we didn't like that. We wanted to break free from those constraints

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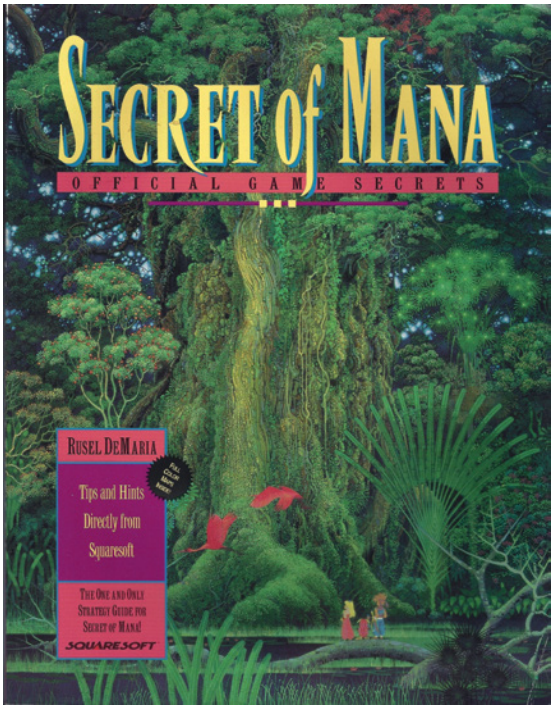

somehow, and everything with *Secret of Mana* began from that idea."

And thankfully for gamers across the world, Messrs. Ishii and Tanaka overwhelmingly succeeded at their objective. *Secret of Mana* became a massive hit and went on to influence numerous subsequent action RPG titles, including its own 1995 Japan-only sequel *Seiken Densetsu 3 (Trials of Mana)*, which finally enjoyed a North American release in 2019 on the Nintendo Switch.

FUN FACT:

Secret of Mana was programmed in assembly language by legendary Nasir Gebelli, the genius software architect behind Rad Racer, 3-D WorldRunner, and all three Final Fantasy titles on the NES. Square sold so many copies of Mana that Gebelli was able to retire off his royalties from the game.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Secret of Mana is a towering masterpiece of action, adventure, storytelling, game design, and all-around enjoyment. An enduring classic of the action RPG genre and the console era as a whole, the game is so good you don't just play it, you live it.

—Shane Stein, executive producer of Adventures in Game Chasing

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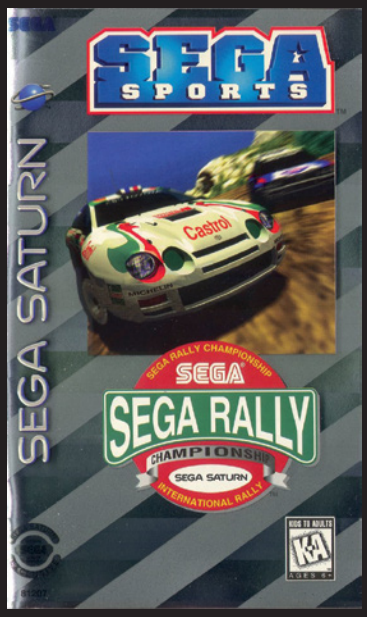
CHAPTER 60

SEGA RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP



SEGA SATURN
GENRE: SPORTS CAR RACING
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA AM3 R&D DIVISION
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1995

We've all seen endless articles, interviews, videos, podcasts, and books detailing the Saturn's surprise launch in May 1995, and how it caught publishers and retailers so completely off guard that it irreparably damaged Sega's reputation in North America. KB Toys famously never forgave Sega for the surprise launch and didn't carry the Saturn. Tom Kalinske resigned as president and CEO of Sega of America. Dogs and cats living together. Mass hysteria!

And while all of that was extremely harmful to the ultimate fate of the Saturn, it should be noted that the marquee launch games—*Virtua Fighter* and *Daytona USA*—really weren't ready for prime time either. They played pretty well for the most part but suffered from frame rate problems and major graphical issues (something that forever branded the Saturn as a poor 3-D system). I was among the many who still dumped dozens of hours into each and enjoyed them immensely, but they were pretty rough.

Sega began mending bridges relatively quickly. Those of us who had registered our Saturns got a free copy of *Virtua Fighter Remix*, complete with texture-mapped fighters and generally better performance. It was a nice way to say thanks to fans who'd stood by the system during that tough first year.

It was at the end of 1996, though, when Sega truly hit its stride on the Saturn. This substantial jump in quality was personified by three releases in particular: *Virtua Cop 2*, *Virtua Fighter 2*, and *Sega Rally Championship*. The trio came to market with a classy television campaign that was a sea change from the previous year's "Theater of the Eye" marketing weirdness (check out the disturbing commercial on YouTube). *Virtua Fighter 2* and *Sega Rally Championship* were housed in striking silver cases. It was as though Sega was signaling that they wanted a do-over on the Saturn.

Sega Rally Championship was a revolutionary racing game when it hit arcades in 1995. Sega was riding high on the continued success of *Daytona USA*, but first-time producer Tetsuya Mizuguchi wanted Sega's next racing game to take a more interesting turn (so to speak). He lobbied hard to tackle the rally-racing genre, a sport he'd fallen in love with after visiting Sega Europe. He liked the notion that rally racing would allow his game to present players with tracks running through varied landscapes such as forests, deserts, and mountains, as opposed to the closed-circuit NASCAR aesthetic of *Daytona USA*.

Other major improvements included variable terrain and licensed vehicles. The Toyota Celica CT-Four and Lancia Delta HF Integrale were two of the first real-world cars to appear in a 3-D arcade game. When the game made its way to the Sega Saturn, the historic Lancia Stratos HF was added as an unlockable car.

The Saturn version obviously doesn't look as good as its model 2 predecessor, but it was still miles ahead of the previous year's *Daytona USA* port. More importantly, as with *Virtua Fighter 2*, the Saturn version plays just about perfectly. Somehow, even lacking the force feedback steering wheel and deluxe moving cabinet found in the arcade, the cars in *Sega Rally Championship* on the Saturn have an incredible sense of weight and momentum. You really can feel the difference between each road surface. Driving through standing water bogs

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your car down, and you can feel the tires bite when you slide from dirt to tarmac. It's amazing how well it all translates to a digital d-pad!

Imagine jumping from the line, screaming up the hill on a small strip of asphalt. The rear of your car steps out a bit as you take a gentle right-hander. You feather the throttle to keep from sliding into the gravel to the side of the road, your thumb dancing back and forth on the d-pad, trying to avoid opposite lock (countersteering) because you know you'll never make the tunnel ahead otherwise. Suddenly, a 90-degree turn on the gravel—you overshoot it a bit and your car careens toward the wall. You jam the loud pedal as hard as you can, and swear you can FEEL your rear tires dig into the road. The back of your car drops as its momentum shifts forward, leaving the impending collision in a cloud of dust as you rocket away toward the next part of your lap.

Sega Rally Championship has tremendous staying power. On its basic setting you can finish the game in less than seven minutes, which sounds insane. There are only four tracks here, and on the default setting you run only a single lap on each. But due to the nature of the racing, it's possible to set a good time without putting together perfect laps. And since the driving feels so intuitive, you find yourself compelled to try again and again. While there are other cars in the game, the real enemy is the clock.

Well, the clock and anyone else you happen to be competing against. I was living with four or five roommates when *Sega Rally Championship* came out, and we spent a ridiculous amount of time learning where to shave thousandths of a second off every lap. We constantly bettered each other's time, throwing down the gauntlet and betting on things like chores and meals against each new run.

If real-time, head-to-head competition is more your style, *Sega Rally Championship* has that covered too. Remember when racing games used to have split-screen modes? This game certainly does. Other updates to the home conversion include the ability to run three laps on each course, as well as the option to adjust and save setups for each of the cars in the game. Or you could pick up the subsequent *Sega Rally Plus Netlink Edition*, which added online play, improved 3-D Controller support, and a few graphical updates.

For all its problems, 1996 was an exciting time for the Sega Saturn. Games such as *Sega Rally Championship* and *Virtua Fighter 2* offered a tantalizing glimpse of what the system was capable of in the right hands. And when you consider that the *Sega Rally Championship* port was rebuilt from the ground up for the Saturn, that's quite an accomplishment. It's a shame the system didn't enjoy the success it truly deserved in North America.

FUN FACT:

There was a limited edition of the Sega Rally Championship arcade machine that included a full-sized car. Tetsuya Mizuguchi claims there were only four made and that they cost approximately $250,000 each.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

This is a relatively short arcade racer that has amazing staying power. It looks great, sounds even better, and is a joy to play with a standard controller, which was totally unexpected, at least by me.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

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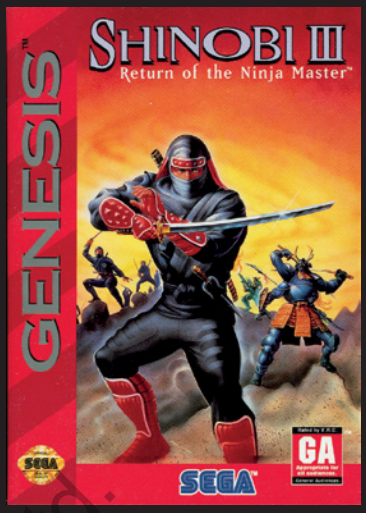
CHAPTER 61

SHINOBI III: RETURN OF THE NINJA MASTER



SEGA GENESIS

GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / HACK-AND-SLASH

PUBLISHER: SEGA

DEVELOPER: MEGASOFT

1 PLAYER

1993

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The best game in a phenomenal series that includes such progenitors as *Shinobi* (arcade, Master System, various) and *The Revenge of Shinobi* (Genesis), *Shinobi III* continues the adventures of Joe Musashi (code name Shinobi) of the Oboro School of Ninjitsu.

Long ago, Joe defeated the Neo Zeed organization, which was the nemesis of the Oboro school. Its leaders were captured or killed, putting them out of business. However, Joe, while training to improve his already awesome ninja skills in the mountains of Japan, discovered that they are secretly rebuilding their evil crime syndicate. Of more immediate concern is the fact that Neo Zeed's minions have been ordered to destroy our hero with promises of riches and power for succeeding, and death and torment by Neo Zeed's war demons for failing. As such, they are on the attack.

You, as Joe, must battle your way through seven levels of play (over 25 stages in all) to find Neo Zeed's leaders and defeat them once and, perhaps, for all. Said levels include Zeed's Resurrection, Secret Entry, Body Weapon, Destruction, Electric Demon, Traps, and The Final Confrontation. The level titles aren't very descriptive, but don't be surprised when you encounter typical platforming environments and elements such as forests, caves, industrial areas, conveyor belts, and elevators.

Despite the familiar themes of some of the stages, they stand out since they are absolutely gorgeous, exploiting the power of the Genesis to the max. Trees stand tall, and waterfalls undulate in the background and foreground. Falling leaves blow in the wind. Caves are detailed with stalactites and stalagmites and other rock formations, some of which touch to form columns.

Fight strong and smart, and you'll eventually reach sci-fi areas populated by flying brain creatures, muck monsters, strange humanoids, and vats of boiling, bubbling chemicals. You'll also ascend a mountain by leaping from falling rock to falling rock, navigate a labyrinthine castle similar to the one in *The Revenge of Shinobi*, climb on and inside a huge flying fortress, and battle an assortment of huge, nicely detailed bosses, including one that looks like Mechagodzilla. This is a great-looking actioner with a lot of variety in the visuals and gameplay.

As with previous titles in the series, Joe is a nimble ninja, running, jumping, crouching, and throwing shurikens at enemies. When he's in close range he'll execute a melee attack. He's even more agile this time out and has a variety of new moves, including a dash maneuver and a running slash (which renders him temporarily invincible to projectiles), helping make for a speedier game. In addition, Joe can now jump-kick to attack in midair, spider-walk hand over hand along ceilings, pull off a kabekeri side-to-side wall-scaling maneuver, and use his blocking move at any time (as opposed to only when powered up as in *The Revenge of Shinobi*).

Separating *Shinobi III* from its forerunners even more is a stage where you ride horseback (left to right). During this stage, enemies appear in the background and jump up to the foreground to attack, which is impressive and exciting. Your noble steed will jump

over fences in cloudy weather, with exclamation points warning you of when to jump and spears raining down that you must dodge. Further, there's a stage that has you riding on a jet ski (again, left to right), similar to the surfing section of *TMNT III: The Manhattan Project* for the NES. These stages really mix things up, adding to the variety and entertainment value of the game.

As with *The Revenge of Shinobi*, Joe can unleash four types of ninjitsu (ninja magic). He can automatically use one per level, but there are also hidden ones to find. The four types include Ikazuchi, which is a bolt of lightning that makes you temporarily invincible; Kariu, which unleashes four pillars of fire that damage any enemies on screen; Fushin, which are ghost images of Shinobi that make you jump higher; and Mijin, where Joe becomes a living bomb. The last of these is so powerful that you actually lose a life upon execution (so to speak). The game, which offers four difficulties and lets you start with zero to 70 shurikens in stock, is easier to beat than *The Revenge of Shinobi*.

Shinobi III was originally scheduled for release in 1992. In fact, *GamePro*, *Mean Machines*, and certain other publications published previews (and, in some cases, actual reviews) featuring art, levels, enemies, and special moves that ended up not being in the finished product that appeared on store shelves.

Kurt Kalata, writing for www.hardcoregaming101.net, explained that two beta ROMs with numerous altered elements were leaked online:

> The first beta is almost entirely different, showing off a huge number of stages that are completely unlike the final release. Unused areas include a night-time stage in a Japanese castle, a canyon, and a refinery. Previously unseen enemies include a mid-boss with a gigantic machine gun, a muscular dude with an extending arm, and some kind of mutated tiger. There's also a fifth ninjitsu power called Hakuiru, which uses the power of ice and freezes everything on the screen, thereby making all special attacks analogous to the ninjas in the Game Gear games. There's also a strange hidden puzzle game. The second beta ROM is much closer to the final game, but with several subtle changes (including enemies which appear to be riding *Return of the Jedi*-style speeders) and a variation on the labyrinth level that removes the maze elements.

Kalata also wrote that he was enamored with the game's music: "The music is no longer supplied by Koshiro and is instead provided by Hirofumi Murasaki, Morihiko Akiyama, and Masayuki Nagao. It's an excellent soundtrack, providing more complex compositions than typically seen in video game music. While generally not as melodic or immediately memorable as Koshiro's tracks, it utilizes digitized samples much better than most titles on the system and is generally in a class of its own."

For modern audiences, *Shinobi III* was uploaded to the Wii Shop Channel, and it appears on the *Sega Genesis Collection* (PS2, PSP) and *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* (PS3, X360). I'm glad the emulated version of the game connected with a new generation of gamers, but I still play it old-school style on my Genesis console, which sits atop a Sega CD and has a Sega 32X plugged into the cartridge slot. I call it my "triple decker," and *Shinobi III* is no stranger to this setup. Far from it, in fact.

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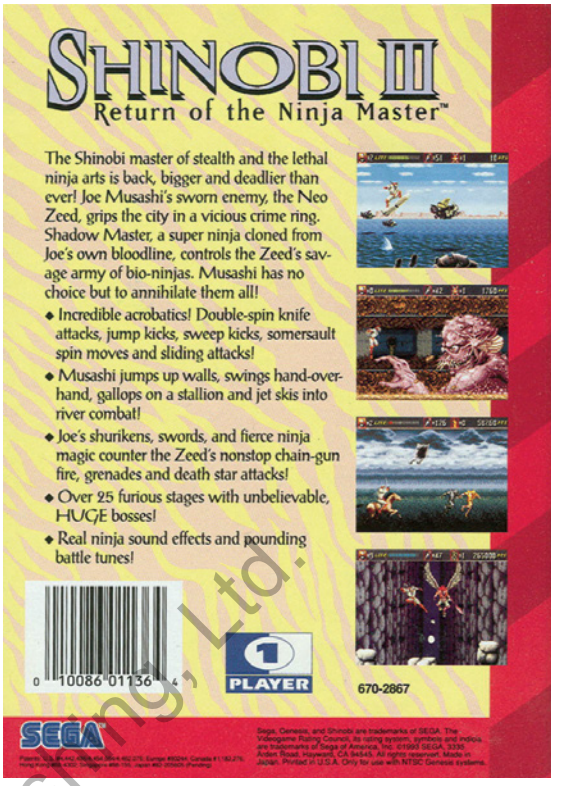
FUN FACT:

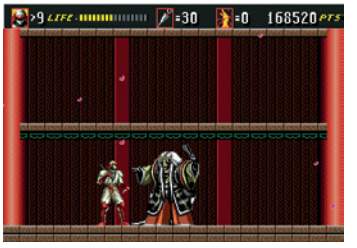
In 2011, an iPhone version of the game was released. Reviewing the game for ign.com, Levi Buchanan wrote, "As a monster fan of the Shinobi series, I'm happy to have Shinobi III on my iPhone. However, the control placement detracts from the fun in full screen, but in windowed mode everything is just too small."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Shinobi III has big, detailed characters; colorful graphics; varied levels; an agile protagonist with lots of moves; and hard-core ninja action that's challenging but never frustrating. In short, it's awesome!

—Brett Weiss





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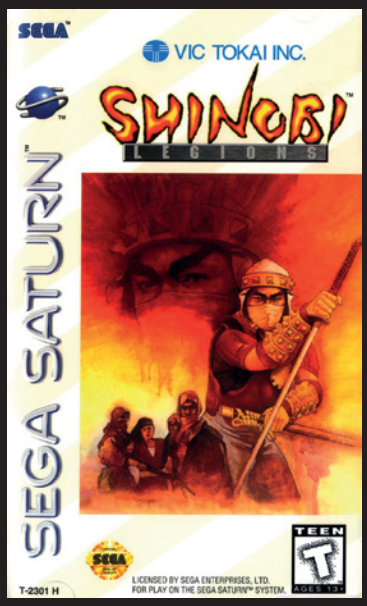
CHAPTER 62

SHINOBI LEGIONS



SEGA SATURN
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / HACK-AND-SLASH
PUBLISHER: VIC TOKAI
DEVELOPER: TOSE
1 PLAYER
1995

By 1995, the Shinobi series had been a premier franchise for Sega since its arcade debut in 1987. The original game headlined the Sega Master System, while its arcade sequel, *Shadow Dancer*, saw a wonderful port to the Genesis in 1990. It was one of three exceptional games in the series to hit the 16-bit console. *The Revenge of Shinobi* was an incredible early action game for the platform, which also happened to kick off the long-running collaboration between Sega and composer extraordinaire Yuzo Koshiro. And late in the Genesis era, *Shinobi III* pushed the system to the limits with seat-of-the-pants action and screen-filling bosses.

So, of course there was a *Shinobi* game filling a slot in the early Saturn library. Something called "Shinobi X" was appearing on launch lists and magazine previews right from the start. But the midnineties was a bit of a strange time for Sega on both sides of the Pacific. I assume Sega of Japan's internal teams were all tied up coming to grips with getting 3-D arcade ports to run on the newly minted console, so the decision was made to farm out such an important franchise to a third-party developer by the name of Tose.

Tose Software was founded in 1979 and, as of this writing, has been going strong for more than 40 years. Since it was rare for Japanese games to feature proper credits in the '80s and '90s, it's almost impossible to know how many games Tose has developed—or helped develop—over the decades, but the smart money says it's more than 1,000 titles. This "ghost developer" has worked with an unbelievable number of publishers over the years, from the smallest outfits to groups as prominent as Capcom, Konami, and Nintendo. And, of course, Sega.

But as Tose vice president Masa Agarida once put it, "Our policy is not to have a vision. Instead, we follow our customer's visions." So the surprising design philosophy behind *Shinobi Legions* is all on Sega. At a time when 3-D was all the rage, even if your game wasn't full of polygons in 1995 there was a good chance you were looking at prerendered sprites in the vein of *Donkey Kong Country*. In fact, that was a path Sega took itself on the Saturn in a lot of games, most notably in their Shining series of RPGs.

But with *Shinobi Legions*, Sega seemed to look a bit further into the recent past, choosing to adopt the live-actor-as-sprites aesthetic used so effectively by Midway in the early nineties, popularized by games such as *NARC*, *Revolution X*, and *Mortal Kombat*.

It's an odd choice that is quite jarring the first time you play *Shinobi Legions*. Especially in 1995, when the most recent franchise outing had been such a graphical tour de force on the Genesis. Sprites based on actual human movement just don't have the fluidity that fans of the series had come to expect, and since a lot of the background art in *Legions* is based on actual photographs, anything in the game that isn't sourced on real-world objects really sticks out!

What this choice did lead to, though, is some of the greatest video game cutscenes of all time. Between each level we get lengthy videos of hero Sho on his quest to save his sister Aya from his insane brother, Kazuma, through what appears to be a factory full of empty boxes. It's clear that the budget for these scenes was quite low, but you have to respect how far the filmmakers were able to stretch it. The action looks just

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this side of *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* quality, but the actors really sell it for all they're worth. It's glorious.

Ken Horowitz, writing for *Sega-16*, said this about *Shinobi Legions*: "The FMV scenes may have been laughably cheesy, but the digitized graphics worked really well. Many *Shinobi* purists disliked—even hated—the new style, but I think it was time for something new without breaking the successful formula established by the series over so much time. . . . What relation Sho and his clan have to Musashi, if any, is unknown, but the game is still a great play."

This alarming shift in visual style hides an interesting game. From the start, *Shinobi Legions* almost feels like a warmed-over *Revenge of Shinobi* clone. The opening level is similar, the somersault jump is here as well, and our hero walks along in front of a wall where he has to fight enemies placed both low and high. The first inkling that this is not just a throwback to the Genesis years is when you realize that your shurikens are not nearly as useful as they were in previous games. Sho's katana is far more effective than his projectiles and is used for everything from defending enemy throwing knives, to deflecting them back, to slicing any number of creatures and items in half (complete with anime-style fountains of blood).

But that's not all. Sho is an extremely versatile hero with so many moves the manual doesn't actually contain all of them. He can swing his catana in different directions on the basis of which button is pressed on the d-pad: forward thrusts, an arc over his head, or a wide top-to-bottom swing. He can thrust down during a jump. He can do a lunging thrust while running. He can roll forward, hang from ceilings, and jump off walls. Basically, he's just as capable as the heroes of previous games in the series.

And you'll need every bit of Sho's ability to get through *Shinobi Legions*. The difficulty ratchets up fairly quickly. It's not long before you're riding through a mine cart level with shuriken flying in from all directions, making split-second jumps, and avoiding overhanging stalactites. The game may move a bit slowly, but the challenge is relentless.

Oddly enough, Sega of America chose not to release *Shinobi Legions* in North America. Instead, it licensed that job to Vic Tokai. This wasn't totally unheard of on the Saturn—Time Warner Interactive released *Virtua Racing* on the console. But even with that big Vic Tokai logo on the cover, who in the world sees a title like *Shinobi Legions* and doesn't think "Sega"?

Shinobi Legions is different. I'm not sure it lives up to its predecessors, and honestly I think the expectation set by its franchise does the game no favors. However, *Legions* stands on its own as an interesting take on a well-established genre.

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FUN FACT:

For the European release, the original soundtrack was completely rewritten by Richard Jacques (probably best known today for his Sonic R soundtrack) to be more in line with previous games in the series.

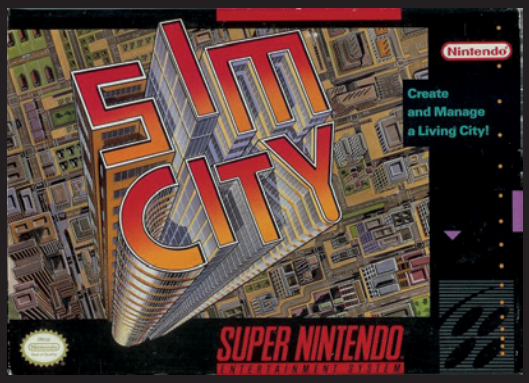
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

While it doesn't feel like much of a sequel to the three games on the Sega Genesis, Shinobi Legions is a solid, interesting game in its own right that deserves a playthrough.

—Greg Sewart, former EGM editor, host of the Player One podcast, creator of Generation 16

CHAPTER 63

SIMCITY



SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: WORLD-BUILDING SIMULATION
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 PLAYER
1991

SimCity today is well known as a Super Nintendo classic, but it was already one of my favorite computer games long before I touched an SNES control pad. I first encountered it at age 12 in 1990, at my friend Paul's house, where we played it for hours along with another friend named Austin. What stood out most vividly is simply how different it was. Virtually every other PC game I knew was an action, adventure, or sports title, and building an on-screen city with thoughtful deliberateness was certainly not what I ever would have envisioned as exciting. (Quickly smashing them apart was a totally different story—I loved *Rampage* on the NES.)

But as mundane as it sounded, *SimCity* revealed itself to be amazingly fun, and even addictive. Indeed, millions of sold copies and multiple sequels later, we're all now familiar. But back then it was a wonder to behold, and the game ultimately became an SNES launch title port that eclipsed even the original in quality.

SimCity's premise is straightforward—start with an empty landmass and create and grow a virtual city. You are the city's mayor. Available tools at your disposal include residential blocks, commercial and industrial zones, roads and railroads, coal and nuclear power plants, police and fire stations, airports, stadiums, and even park acreage. Place and arrange these on your landmass however you like, and watch the area sprout from a small village to, potentially, a thriving megalopolis.

Achieving this goal is not so simple. To grow your city's economy and population, you have to build in ways that attract residents and businesses. But all this construction costs money, and, unless you use a cheat code, your funds are limited, depending primarily on taxes collected. Raise taxes too high and you might chase away residents. Meanwhile, your city will experience challenges from traffic congestion to crime to natural disasters, and resolving these obstacles often requires both cash and ingenuity. The game allows for multiple saved cities, and each time you begin a new one the landmass shape and scenarios encountered are largely randomized, leading to endless replayability.

All these features are present in both PC and console versions, but in a prime example of what makes Nintendo such a beloved brand around the world, the SNES version shines even more brightly than the original, specifically because of how the company Nintendo-izes an outside developer's game. In the original Maxis computer version, you simply jump into city building right from the get-go, but on the SNES a talkative little fellow named Dr. Wright, who closely resembles Albert Einstein, shows up to guide you along the way. In actuality named after *SimCity*'s real-life architect Will Wright, Dr. Wright offers sage advice and hints throughout your city-building adventures. Oh, and he also lets you know that his favorite hobbies include playing fellow SNES launch titles *Super Mario World*, *F-Zero*, and *Pilotwings*. As your city grows, meanwhile, achieving a certain population threshold rewards you with a giant Mario statue for you to proudly display. Furthermore, if a giant lizard attack (one of the game's potential natural disasters) hits your city, it's not just any oversized reptile—it's Bowser himself rampaging through your streets, leaving his typical destruction and mayhem.

Nintendo adds further touches absent from the PC version as well, primarily in the form of gifts from Dr. Wright when you hit various goals. The Mario statue

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is one such gift, but many others abound, such as zoos, amusement parks, banks, casinos, libraries, fountains, windmills, and even your own mayor's house. *SimCity* contains an additional play mode where, beyond simply starting a city from scratch, players can take over certain existing cities facing imminent disasters (such as San Francisco shaken by an earthquake, Detroit reeling from crime, and Rio de Janeiro half underwater from floods), and the SNES cartridge adds bonus scenarios not included on the PC original.

I didn't own a Super Nintendo until about a year after the console debuted, and I acquired *SimCity* sometime after that, but I played it countless times upon initial release at my friend Asher's house, and we had a great time with it. I still chuckle while recalling some of the silly names we gave our cities: Q-Tip, Move Here, and Beavis, to mention just a few.

Millions of our fellow gamers, meanwhile, enjoyed *SimCity* as well, and reviewers such as Alex Navarro, writing for Gamespot.com in 2006, have indeed concluded that the SNES port is a simulation strategy stalwart:

> *Sim City* is one of those true classics that remain fun and addictive years after their original release . . . the city building genre has come a long way over the years, but even with all that progress, *SimCity* for the SNES still holds up very well. Sure, it looks and sounds old, but it's still some of the most fun you'll ever have building your own city.

Developer Wright, meanwhile, has his own interesting take, according to a 2010 interview with Gamasutra (www.gamasutra.com):

> *SimCity* was always meant to be a caricature of the way a city works, not a realistic model of the way a city works. So we're kind of enhancing dynamics, emphasizing them in a way where you can start seeing ideas, these kinds of truisms in city planning that we manage to capture. Things like the idea that roads don't relieve traffic, they breed it. You think we need to build more roads, but when you put more roads in, it actually encourages more volume, and the traffic gets worse. Those are kind of counterintuitive dynamics that you can capture in a model like *SimCity*, even if it's not accurately modeling traffic elements in a real city.

Fascinating stuff, and these tips sure could have come in handy back in the day. If only he had opened up to *Nintendo Power* with this in 1991! But perhaps even better is that he created a game that let us discover these nuances ourselves, and we've had tons of fun in the process.

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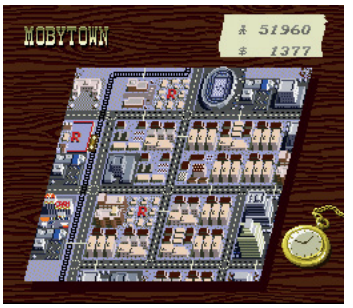
FUN FACT:

Will Wright got the idea for SimCity from the level editor he created while developing his earlier game, Raid on Bungeling Bay, which was released on the Commodore 64 in 1984 and was later ported to the Famicom and NES.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

SimCity is at once groundbreaking, innovative, influential, and fun. Sequels and spin-offs, such as SimAnt, SimCopter, and The Sims, would expand on its vision, but the urban simulation genre begins here.

—Shane Stein, executive producer of Adventures in Game Chasing



CHAPTER 64

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM
1 PLAYER
1991

When it comes to the success of any major video game company, one can almost hear a disembodied voice paraphrasing famed political consultant James Carville: "It's the mascots, stupid!" Try as one might, it's generally accepted as nearly impossible to launch (and much less sustain) a successful video game console without the strong back of an adorable, cartoony mascot on which to perch its hopes. NEC had Bonk! PlayStation had Crash! Nintendo, of course, had Mario! And Sega had . . . Alex Kidd . . . ?

Yeah. Alex Kidd.

Alex Kidd was Sega's most successful mascot in the pre-16-bit world, but that's not saying much. Alex was a small half-child, half-monkey boy sporting overalls who ran and jumped his way through his first game, *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* for the Sega Master System, in 1986. His design and gameplay mechanics were obviously influenced by *Super Mario Bros.*, since Alex would punch blocks, swim underwater, explore castles, and the like. *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* was the first of five games to star Alex on Sega's underdog Master System platform—most of which were pretty fun (not you, *Alex Kidd: High-Tech World*). In fact, Alex even received his own Sega Genesis game early in the console's life span, titled *Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle* (1990), but it had mixed to negative reviews.

Meanwhile, Nintendo's debut 16-bit console, the Super Nintendo, was in full swing with *Super Mario World*. Sega's scrappy monkey boy just wasn't up to the task of dethroning everyone's favorite turtle-stomping plumber. Sega needed . . . something. Something new. Something . . . blue!

In 1991, after a series of drastic and sometimes contentious character design changes, Sega finally found themselves a mascot in the form of a speedy, spiny, blue mammal in running shoes. *Sonic the Hedgehog* took the platforming genre and injected it with adrenaline . . . and "Blast Processing," whatever the hell that is. In any case, the game eventually replaced *Altered Beast* (Sega, 1989) as the Genesis console pack-in title, and the rest is history.

Sonic the Hedgehog does what many platforming games do: run here, jump there, kill that, get that power-up, etc. The difference with *Sonic* is that these things happen very quickly! Whereas Mario would *sometimes* run (more like a jog, but okay), Sonic would almost *always* run. *Sonic the Hedgehog* is all about speed, as is implied by the name. In the days before YouTube videos and online demos, it was hard to imagine the game's speed vis-à-vis the screenshots in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *GamePro* magazines prior to playing it for ourselves.

When I finally managed to get my hands on a copy of the game, I was completely blown away. Immediately after you turn the game on, *Sonic the Hedgehog* greets you with that iconic, digitally vocalized "SAY-GAAAAH" intro with accompanying blue Sega logo on a white background. Fade to black. Then "Sonic Team Presents." Fade to black again. Then, after three quick cymbal strikes, that classic melody begins as the title screen appears with Sonic popping his head through the winged logo à la Porky Pig's "That's all, Folks!" while wagging his finger at us Dikembe Mutombo style. The whole process lasts only about 10 seconds, but it does a

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fantastic job of amping up the gamer for what is to follow. You just know you are in for something special.

And special it is. *Sonic the Hedgehog* hits the ground running and sets you off on a one-of-a-kind mad dash through the locales of the picturesque outdoor Green Hill Zone, the magma-filled catacombs of the Marble Zone, the urban sprawl of the Star Light Zone, and more, all the while collecting gold rings scattered throughout that serve as Sonic's life force of sorts. As long as you have at least one ring in your possession, you can sustain an enemy attack without dying. Collecting 100 gold rings earns you an extra life.

Each level is composed of its own unique assortment of animal inhabitants turned into unwilling robotic sentries at the hands of the evil and rotund Dr. Ivo Robotnik as he endeavors to capture the six Chaos Emeralds for his own nefarious goals. It's up to Sonic to stop him and free his animal friends from their cybernetic bondage by, of course, jumping on them or running through them at insanely high speeds. At each level's end, our blue hero must contend with Dr. Robotnik, who uses his many diabolical vehicles and contraptions to thwart Sonic's attempts. Periodically Sonic stumbles upon dizzying bonus rounds where he navigates a large rotating labyrinth and attempts to recapture a Chaos Emerald for himself.

Sonic was an instant masterpiece that sent shock waves through the gaming industry. Sega knew what they had in their new mascot, and didn't hesitate to immediately pit the spiky, blue ball of blur against Nintendo's Mario through a multitude of TV and print ad campaigns. As was evidenced by user reviews and game sales, Sonic was a force with which to contend. So much so that Sonic's popularity began turning Nintendo's nearly unwavering consumer loyalty toward the Genesis console in droves. Sega smartly framed Sonic as the new, hip alternative to Nintendo's old-fashioned plumber. Sega's target marketing demographic, teens, bought into it with abundance. And, while Mario's reign was far from over, Sonic's rise proved that there was finite room at the top of the video game mascot heap for *two* number ones.

Sonic rightfully cemented his cartoony mug in the bedrock of video game's Mount Rushmore alongside the likes of Mario, Pac-Man, and, perhaps, Lara Croft. Sonic would go on to star in four more Genesis titles and more than 70 games across a variety of platforms in the years to come, despite Sega's eventual departure from the console-manufacturing scene.

With three decades under his belt (though I don't think he actually wears pants), Sonic has done what Alex Kidd couldn't—he elevated a Sega console as a contender against Nintendo and served as a major force in the legendary Console Wars of the '90s. Touting a lifetime revenue of nearly $6.5 billion, Sonic is showing no signs of slowing down. Having spawned a series of comic books, cartoons, endless swarms of merchandise, and even a pair of feature films, the future looks as bright for Sega's mascot as the sun's rays glistening off those 16-bit gold rings.

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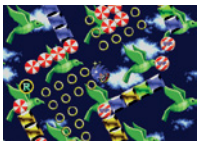
FUN FACT:

Horror movie legend John Carpenter has stated that he's a lifelong fan of the Sonic the Hedgehog video game series. In fact, he once claimed, "I even like the one where he turns into a werewolf," which is a reference to Sonic Unleashed (Sega, 2008), an entry that has received some of the most universally negative criticisms of the entire franchise. Given that the game was an unintentional horror show, maybe that's what appealed to him.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The game's speed and graphics have been talked about to death, so I'd prefer to focus on an aspect that never gets enough credit: the sound. Sonic the Hedgehog has one of the best sound palettes of any game I've ever played. The deep and upbeat musical score is complemented by some truly iconic sound effects. Bouncing off a bumper. Picking up a shield. Spilling all your rings. Doctor Robotnik's vehicles exploding. Capturing a Chaos Emerald. You just heard all those sounds in your head, don't lie!

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast



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CHAPTER 65

SPLATTERHOUSE

TURBOGRAFX-16
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT
PUBLISHER: NEC
DEVELOPER: NAMCO
1 PLAYER
1990

The name "Namco" conjures up brightly colored, fun, frantic arcade titles from the golden age of gaming. Games such as *Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, and *Mappy*. But Namco has a dark side too. This was never more apparent than in 1988, when they unleashed *Splatterhouse* in arcades on an unsuspecting public. For years, rumors swirled about the game and its previously unseen level of graphic violence—violence that while tame by today's standards shocked arcade goers of the time. Supposedly the game was banned from US arcades. Supposedly you were playing a serial killer looking for victims. In a nation that was suffering through the final phases of the "Satanic Panic," those things certainly seemed possible. It didn't help that one would rarely find the game in arcades.

Yes, the game had unprecedented levels of violence, but it had never been banned from US arcades, and you certainly weren't playing as a serial killer. Namco made the game a tribute to slasher flicks, and the protagonist looked like Jason Voorhees of *Friday the 13th* fame. However, that was where the similarities ended. *Splatterhouse* is, at heart, a love story. Two college students, Rick Taylor and Jennifer Wills, have sought refuge from a storm in the old West Mansion, known in local legend as the "Splatterhouse" due to the activities of its long-gone owner, Dr. West. Upon entering the mansion, Jennifer is abducted by . . . something, and Rick is attacked and left for dead. What saves him is the Terror Mask, an ancient artifact that imparts tremendous power to the wearer. Rick, now a lumbering mass of supernaturally possessed muscle, sets off into the depths of West Mansion to find and save his beloved.

The full history of the arcade game's development is shrouded in mystery. Yes, it was intended as a tribute to Western slasher flicks, both popular and obscure, with a healthy dose of Japanese horror as well. But beyond the obvious there isn't much info out there. Due to the arcade game being so seldom seen, most people in the West had to wait until a home port of the game was released to experience it fully. With the arrival of both the Sega Genesis and Turbografx-16 in 1989, it was only a matter of time. Namco, who had thrown most of their support for the 16-bit consoles behind the PC Engine in Japan, did port the game to the PC Engine in HuCard format, and aside from a few things being cut for memory purposes, *Splatterhouse* survived the transition in full. It didn't take long for NEC to localize the game for a US release on the TurboGrafx. They went all out promoting it too, including (but not limited to) magazine ads, giveaways, and even a TV commercial.

My childhood friend Quincy was the only person I knew who owned a Turbo console, and while he was visiting my family in summer 1990, he picked up a copy of the game. I was already a fan of horror games, most notably *Castlevania* and *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, so when he showed me *Splatterhouse* my mind was blown. The box art alone sold me on it, but seeing the game in action cemented my desire to get a Turbo firmly in place. When I began my first real job in January 1993, one of my first big purchases was a Turbo, and, of course, *Splatterhouse* was the first game I got for it.

Splatterhouse begins in the dungeons below West Mansion's Annex. Rick wakes up and immediately gets to work, splattering zombies (called Deadmen) with

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his fists and a 2×4. Once he fights his way past a roomful of rotting meat, which is infested with giant, carnivorous Boreworms, he enters stage 2, where he must fight his way through the Annex and the sewers, from which he emerges to fight an entire room possessed by a Poltergeist. After that, stage 3 takes Rick through the grounds surrounding the mansion. After encountering the terrifying Biggy Man, a skinless giant with a burlap sack over his head and chain saws for hands, Rick enters stage 4, where he must fight his way through the mansion's lobby; a hall of mirrors, where he's attacked by mirror images of himself; and the West Chapel, where he must fight a disembodied blue monster head called Evil Sleep (in the arcade game and PC Engine port, it was a floating-upside-down Evil Cross), which is surrounded by flying zombie heads.

Stage 5 is the gauntlet, where at the end Rick finally finds Jennifer. However, she's been possessed and transforms into a slavering abomination with 6-foot retractable claws. Rick is forced to kill her but then takes the fight to its source: stage 6, the heart of the mansion itself, known as the Womb. Rick finally destroys the creature called Mother, which has been giving birth to all the monsters that inhabited West Mansion, but Mother's destruction causes West Mansion to be set aflame, and Rick must escape through the final stage. Avoiding indestructible flaming Deadmen and rolling logs, Rick finally reaches the gravesite of a creature called Hell Chaos, which appears to him as a giant rotting head and hands. Once Hell Chaos is defeated, a spirit arises from the grave—possibly the spirit of Dr. West—and sends energy orbs flying in all directions as it fades away. The Terror Mask explodes and a somber piece of music plays as West Mansion burns to the ground and the credits roll.

The graphics, while scaled back a bit from the arcade due to the memory limitations of a HuCard, are nevertheless grim and reek of sewer/cemetery filth, exuding the look of a B-grade horror film. The monsters that populate each stage are living flesh piles and eldritch abortions, gruesome horrors begging to be put out of their misery by a well-aimed fist, 2×4 strike, or shotgun blast. The sound effects were also cut back, but the ones that are left remain effective, from the buzzing sounds of Biggy Man's chain saws to Jennifer's pleading, desperate cries for help.

Rick's life bar is presented as hearts—actual hearts, as opposed to the Valentine's Day hearts that show up in games such as *Castlevania*. You start each new life with five and do regain two after completing a stage, which helps quite a bit. Rick has his share of weapons with which to slaughter the fiends in the mansion: the 2×4, the shotgun, and a Golden Cleaver, which don't break but will be dropped once you leave an area or, in the shotgun's case, run out of bullets. There are a fair number of single-use weapons too: rocks, harpoons, and wrenches. But first and foremost is Rick's Terror Mask–enhanced strength. You might expect him to be a lumbering mass of uncontrollable muscle, and to a degree, he is. But he's also surprisingly agile, able to dodge all sorts of hazards that can't be destroyed. The built-in turbo buttons on the TurboPad are a lifesaver in some spots. You can punch, kick, and combine those with jumping, plus there's a sliding maneuver that is a bit difficult to execute, but it is extraordinarily powerful when you do get it to work.

One of the more common myths is that the Turbo port of *Splatterhouse* was censored. This is untrue. What few changes were made were because of the aforementioned memory limitations of a HuCard (some enemies, weapons, animation routines, and graphic details had to be scaled back or be removed entirely), as well as some minor tweaks so that the game could be released in the US. Besides the change made to the Evil Cross that I mentioned above, the wooden cross that marks Hell Chaos's grave was replaced with a granite tombstone. And, most likely to prevent a copyright infringement lawsuit from Paramount Pictures, which owned the *Friday the 13th* franchise at the time, the Terror Mask was changed from a white hockey-goalie-style mask to a maroon mask that has kabuki-ish stripes painted on it. A few other features from the arcade original were removed as well, such as a purple, electrified mist that chases Rick and will kill him if you're too slow, and a blue, swirling orb that basically does the same thing in rooms where the mist usually doesn't appear.

Splatterhouse received various sequels over the years, starting with the 1989 Famicom game *Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti*, a humorous take on the series that finally received a release outside Japan in 2020's *Namco Museum Archive Vol. 1* for the Nintendo Switch. *Splatterhouse 2* for the Sega Genesis was released in 1992, followed by *Splatterhouse 3* in 1993, also for the Genesis. Finally, in 2010, a reboot of the series was released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, simply titled *Splatterhouse*.

Splatterhouse was ported to various consoles and PCs over the years. The Japanese-only FM Towns PC (which also had a console version called the Marty) received a near-arcade-perfect port, as did Windows, the Switch (as part of the *Namco Museum Arcade Pac*), and a stand-alone mini arcade machine that also includes

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Splatterhouse 2. The game was also included as a bonus unlockable in the 2010 *Splatterhouse* reboot, along with both *Splatterhouse 2* and *Splatterhouse 3*. The Turbo port was released for the Wii Virtual Console when that was a thing, and most recently was released in 2020 on the Turbografx-16 Mini stand-alone console.

What a great legacy of horror and fun!

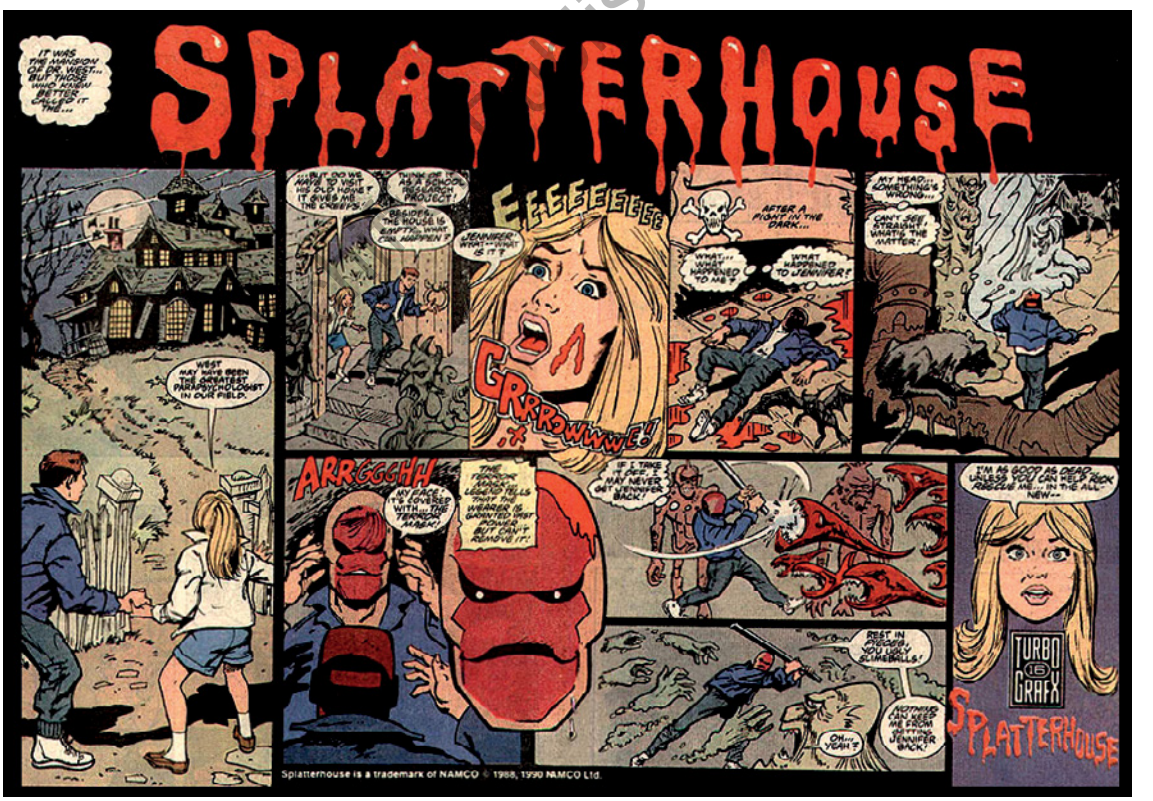
FUN FACT:

While there have been only a few Splatterhouse games, characters and other items from the series have had cameos in various other Namco games, including (but not limited to) the arcade light-gun shooter Gunbalina / Point Blank 3, Smash Court Tennis 2 / Anna Kournikova Tennis, Family Tennis Advance, the RPG Tales of Eternia / Tales of Destiny II, and the music/rhythm game Technic Beat.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Splatterhouse combines the look and feel of classic '80s slasher films with a tried and true form of gameplay, while at the same time departing from standard tropes of the genre—how many other "rescue your girlfriend" brawlers are there where the girlfriend in question dies halfway through the game? None that I can think of!

—Rob Strangman, author of Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman, former webmaster of West Mansion: The Splatterhouse Homepage



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CHAPTER 66

SPYRO THE DRAGON

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: 3-D PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: SONY
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC GAMES
1 PLAYER
1998

Spyro the iconic purple dragon snuck in at the tail end of the time frame for this book, with a release in September 1998. Since the PlayStation hit the market in '95, many gamers meeting Spyro were already familiar with the system. My brother was practically raised on the Dual Analog controllers, and while I still sometimes craved the familiar boxy Nintendo buttons to smash, I understood that the more complicated directional controls were a trade-off for more-intricate gameplay. This meant the game was an easy sell to existing PlayStation owners eager to consume new content.

But *Spyro the Dragon* was also a targeted release to entice newer, younger gamers as converts to PlayStation. There was still a market to be won from the Sega Saturn and Nintendo 64. *Spyro* hoped to follow in the footsteps of *Crash Bandicoot* and serve as one of the primary mascots for PlayStation. He appealed to a wide audience, not only in his visual design but also in his advertised gameplay. For young kids the bright colors and cute dragon were an obvious draw, as was the fact that your ability to roam the world felt like a cartoon you could control. My six-year-old brother was sold. Not to mention, the simplistic appearance had a lot of parents convinced it would be an easy game. (Anyone who ever got stuck in the Jacques, Tree Tops, or the Haunted Towers levels would probably not consider this an "easy" game at all.)

Television commercials were geared more to the preteen and teen population, with singed sheep protesting and boycotting the game in a way that suggested it had more edge than it appeared. Spyro may be cute, but he had attitude. He didn't hesitate to toast innocent sheep or head-butt bad guys to achieve his goals. At 12 years old, my instinct to write the game off as something for babies was overridden by that successful advertising. Plus, the little dude had perfected WWF legend "the Rock's" People's Eyebrow and had the cocky confidence to go straight for a boss battle with Gnasty Gnorc from the very start. The real challenge was for the young dragon to listen to his elders and learn before rushing headfirst into battle. It wasn't just a rescue mission—it was a quest.

The goal of *Spyro* was a huge draw for me. In most games, you're battling evil or fighting bad guys with just a hint of a backstory to motivate you. In *Spyro*, you're completing tasks to release your frozen friends, and the story unfolds as you play. The short dialogue with each newly freed dragon tapped into an element of gameplay I hadn't realized was important to me. I didn't just want to play the game; I wanted to feel like I was steering the plot. *Spyro* gave players the illusion of story control. Each saved dragon had a name, a voice, and valuable information to contribute to Spyro's journey. While you eventually build up to a battle with the boss Gnasty Gnorc, the introduction to the game is gradual. You can explore the layout of the land, which offers much more free roaming than other games of the time. *Spyro* was a taste of things to come, paving the way for other user-driven-navigation, open-ended games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Except *Spyro* was a family-friendly, lighthearted adventure game that everyone could explore.

It didn't start out that way. Developers at Insomniac Games had initially intended for the game, partially

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inspired by the film *Dragonheart* (1996), to follow the realism of their first release, *Disruptor*. "It was going to be realistic and kind of dark and gritty," remembered Insomniac's chief operating officer, John Fiorito, in an interview with IGN (ign.com). The development team, led by Ted Price, had invested a lot in *Disruptor*, but aside from learning a great deal through the creation process, they didn't receive much return for their efforts. On IGN, Price noted, "I felt, at the time, the team was . . . kind of down. The game didn't really sell. . . . We sort of needed a breath of fresh air." So the team took *Spyro* in a different direction and intentionally attempted to take the family market with a triple threat: a game with vibrant visuals, smooth controls, and diverse playability to appeal to a range of age groups.

If you weren't around to see the transition and growth of video game graphics, it's hard to imagine how breathtaking the details in *Spyro* truly were at the time. Artist Charles Zembillas, who also brought us the character concepts of *Crash Bandicoot*, had serious street cred before taking on *Spyro*. His résumé includes such classics as *She-Ra* and the *Ghostbusters* cartoon. The graphics team at Insomniac Games brought Zembillas's designs to life and set them in the three-dimensional Dragon Realms. The graphics look just as crisp today, at least for those of us who have the gameplay preserved in childhood memories. Only when we consider side-by-side comparisons of the original graphics and the more modern adaptation of *Spyro Reimagined* released on PlayStation 4 in 2018 do we really notice the limitations of the original graphics systems.

It wasn't just the look of *Spyro* we loved. It starts with the sound of crunching snow as a Gnorc Goon plants the Insomniac Games flag in a mountaintop, and the first bars of a theme song blend with the effects of rushing water and flapping dragon wings. The soundtrack was composed by Stewart Armstrong Copeland, who was the drummer for the Police. Mute your television and play through a little of the game. That's basically how Copeland was introduced to *Spyro*—in complete silence. As he navigated through the challenges, he developed the music as he played to best accompany each scene and action. Copeland credits his unique experience scoring *Spyro* as a challenge that led to some of his best work, according to an article from EverythingIsNoise.net. The upbeat piano leads, with rock and even orchestral accompaniment, are beyond background music; the sound seems to propel the gameplay forward. The distinct melodies Copeland created still ignite fiery memories for reminiscing players.

Spyro allowed new gamers to gain the confidence and comfort with the console necessary to become hooked. Many diehard fans cemented their love of PlayStation during these formative years, looking back on *Spyro* with a warm, fuzzy feeling of nostalgia. For my younger brother, *Spyro* was a low-stakes opportunity to run around breathing fire at unsuspecting sheep and chickens. He could hop in at any moment and just enjoy gliding from tall rock pillars. That feeling of the character floating on air was entirely new and multisensory. You could see the gradual descent without the choppy fall of previous 16-bit games; the camera angle followed the character as the smooth controls adjusted, and the lack of footfall sound effects offered just enough silence that you could imagine Spyro's weightlessness.

Since it's a single-player game, I spent a lot of time watching my brother direct Spyro to run wildly as he tried to figure out what to do next, or to jump and fall and jump and fall in attempts to reach platforms that were weirdly out of reach. He never seemed bored or frustrated like he did when *Crash Bandicoot* presented him with difficult levels, because he could always travel between Homeworlds and just have fun pretending to be a dragon until he figured out the next level. He wasn't invested in beating the game; he just wanted to enjoy it.

I've always approached gaming from an obsessive angle. I have OCD, so it's easy for me to become addicted to games with repetitive tasks, and I often feel a borderline unhealthy need to complete a game. And I mean complete. In the late '80s and early '90s, that meant making it through all the levels and seeing the credit screen. But with the introduction of *Spyro*, my video game experience changed dramatically.

Spyro wasn't just about working through levels to reach the end; it was about collecting. Collecting the dragons by rescuing them, each one adding to your counter. Collecting gems, in part to unlock the next stage of the game, but also because it filled that treasure chest. After all, the dragons had lost 12,000 treasure gems, or is it 14,000? Collecting dragon eggs in all five of the worlds, or is it six? You could beat the game by defeating Gnasty Gnorc. Except there was more. My brain could not process the moment I watched the credits after the final boss battle and learned that I would need to collect everything in the Dragon Kingdom to unlock some mysterious loot. Come back when you have reached 100%? This was the challenge my OCD was designed for.

No game could ever live up to the new standard *Spyro* had set, because—just like the little purple dragon

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was ready to push his limits from the beginning—Insomniac Games expected us to push for 120% completion. For the younger readers who are accustomed to consulting YouTube or Google to find game guides and walk-throughs, *Spyro* was our "uphill both ways" olden-times story. I don't mind sounding ancient when I say we could not use the internet to help us locate the missing dragons—we needed to compare notes on the school bus or call each other on land lines to share new discoveries. Earning that 120% meant something!

It was easy to love *Spyro*. Unfortunately, he arrived at a time just before video game merchandising soared. It wasn't like we could go out and get a Funko Pop. In the US they didn't even have *Spyro* plushies or T-shirts until a few years later. The amount of money PlayStation advertisers spent creating an animatronic disgruntled sheep, and no one thought to make toasted goat toys as a promo? Luckily they have more than made up for that over time. *Spyro*—and we can't forget Sparx—not only has sparked two more games in the original series and countless spin-offs but also inspired the *Skylander* series, amassing multiple games on various platforms, cartoon series, comics, novels, and more merch than my '90s childhood self could ever imagine. *Spyro* maintains that unusual ability to appeal to the hearts of gamers of all ages and is still soaring.

No sheep were harmed during the research of this topic. A few gnorcs, but no sheep.

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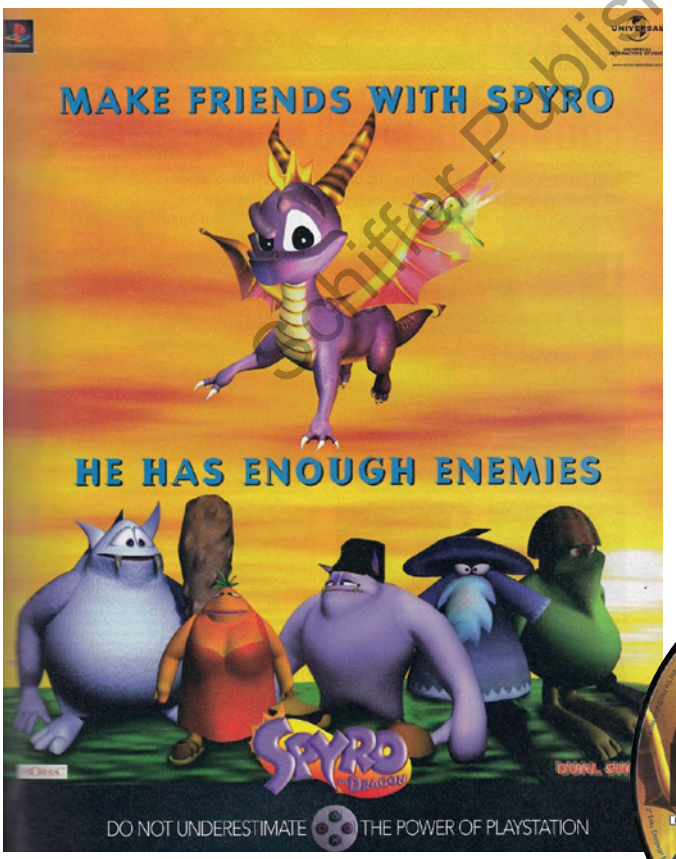
FUN FACT:

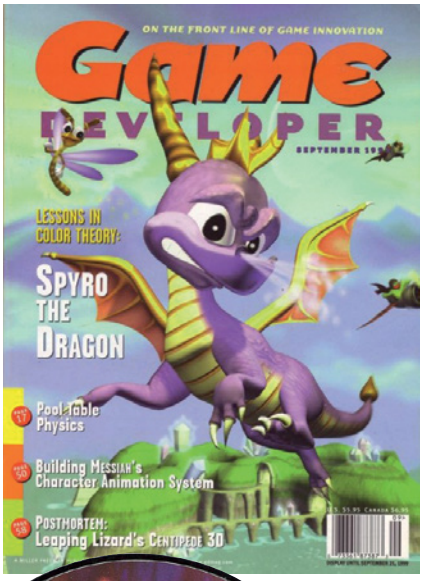
The reason Spyro's flying simulation stimulates such an awesome sensory experience for players is that it was created with the help of an actual NASA rocket scientist to ensure it was as realistic as possible. Matt Whiting, an engineer specializing in flight controls, assisted in the programming, which involved a great deal of mathematics.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The graphics, music, and story line paired with the opportunity to free-roam through the world made Spyro stand out from other games of the time. The unique marketing and versatile gameplay have allowed the dragon with an attitude to appeal to wider audiences for decades. Spyro helped define video gaming of the '90s and prepared gamers for a new millennium full of playing potential.

—Krystle Tiedeman, librarian, producer of The King of Arcades





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CHAPTER 67

STAR CONTROL II

3DO INTERACTIVE MULTIPLAYER
GENRE: SPACE COMBAT SIMULATOR / ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
DEVELOPER: TOYS FOR BOB
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

Earth has been enslaved and you, along with a skeleton crew aboard an alien starship, must save the galaxy from domination by an evil race of conquerors: the Ur-Quan. Go!

More than 25 years after first playing *Star Control II*, I still recall the awe I felt experiencing such a unique game. I can still hear the music. I can still see each cartoonish alien, meticulously detailed. I still have the poster-sized star map, falling apart at its seams from overuse. At a time when most console games were still firmly entrenched in the molds of side-scrolling, fighting, or turn-based RPGs, this open-world title really stood out.

Star Control II needs too much exposition to squeeze into a single cinematic opening. Instead, you discover much of the history and backstory as you play, along with a summary in the better-than-average instruction manual. The 3DO version is an updating of the PC game. It includes more than 10 hours of excellent spoken dialogue, taking advantage of the additional storage afforded by the 3DO's CD-ROM. The characters range from sadistic to whimsical, and the voice-overs remain some of the most entertaining in any game. The alien races you meet all have a piece of the overall story to share, which you must patch together to continue your mission. Each race has its own motivations; some will join your cause willingly, others are impossible to persuade, and yet others may be convinced to join you by making the proper dialogue choices, or by performing tasks for their benefit. In one instance you will even be asked to sell your crew into slavery—for the benefit of the galaxy, of course.

Released at a time when game creators were really stretching their legs, *Star Control II* contains so many elements that it is difficult to properly assign it to any particular genre. The game switches from galactic to intrasolar-system travel. From planetary exploration to space-based combat. From dialogue screens to shipbuilding. And from hyperspace to "quasispace."

Traversing your local part of the galaxy is accomplished via the star map, which has more than 500 stars, each of which can be visited. Traveling between stars is done in hyperspace, and for greater distances, quasispace (essentially a shortcut within a shortcut). There is a local map for each solar system, allowing for direct control of your ship within that system. Each star has planets and moons—more than 3,800 in total—each of which can be surveyed from your control screen in orbit. Most can be landed on and mined for resources. The planet types you explore include Gas Giants, Water, Dust, Selenic, Primordial, Metallic, Reduction, Radioactive, and "Other." Each planet has its own hazards to overcome, including extreme heat, lightning, earthquakes, and native life forms.

To progress, you will need to make the most of your alliances and integrate their alien technology and ships into your growing fleet; your ship can dock up to 12 support and combat ships. Upgrading your ship is instrumental for staying alive. You can upgrade thrusters, turning jets, fuel tanks, crew pods, storage bays, dynamos, and ion gun racks, as well as add up to 10 planetary landers for mining and surface exploration.

Combat, which made up nearly the entire original *Star Control*, takes place within a dedicated screen. One ship from your fleet faces off against the enemy, always one on one. Each alien race has its own unique ship, with primary and secondary weapons or abilities. The

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combat is intentionally unbalanced, creating a playfield that breeds overconfidence, as well as rewarding, hard-earned victories. Each combat vessel is representative of the species that created it. Weak and cowardly species may produce ships that are very good at running away, while warmongering aliens generally have strong offensive ships. And one underpowered but fearless alien race has created a ship with the primary function of self-destructing when close to an enemy ship, destroying both in a blaze of glory.

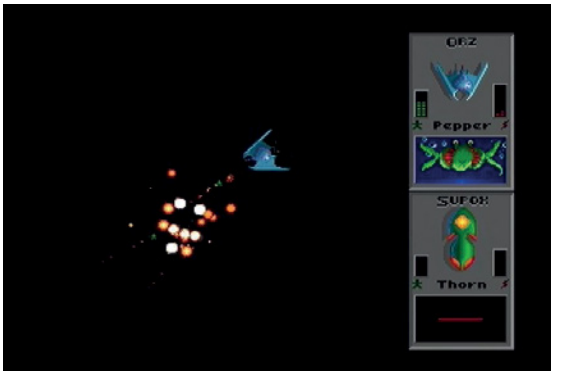
Star Control II is as much an experience as it is a game. The distinctive alien races really shine, each with a unique feel, musical theme, attitude, and sense of humor (or dread). The combat system is simple by today's standards, but it is addictive, and principally fun. The enormity of the star map can be overwhelming, but there is great satisfaction in its exploration, offering a sense of wonder each time you approach a new star, planet, or moon.

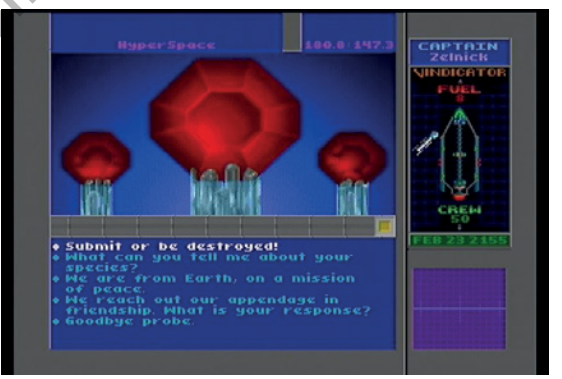
The soundtrack is incredible, ranging from industrial to ephemeral, quirky to triumphant, with each score matched perfectly with the situation it accompanies. Perhaps most importantly, *Star Control II* doesn't shy away from adult themes. There is nothing gratuitous, but themes such as sex, slavery, and genocide are explored from various angles. The player may be faced with an impossible decision, where the best possible outcome is simply the lesser of two evils. In short, *Star Control II* is greater than the sum of its parts.

Fred Ford and Paul Reiche created the *Star Control* franchise, originally published by Accolade. Interestingly, some contemporaneous reviews referred to this game as an RPG, while others described it as action, adventure, or exploration. Clearly the game was helping carve new territory in the industry, and was difficult to define at a time when few games offered this amount of seamless variety and freedom to explore.

Upon release, *Star Control II* was praised for its epic scale, simple controls, great soundtrack and dialogue, and impressive graphics. Obviously some aspects of the game have aged better than others. The graphics might best be described today as quaint; not bad, just more pixilated than I remember. The controls seem sluggish when compared to modern games, though completely adequate. The scale may be dwarfed by some modern games, but it is large enough to be intimidating the first time you travel between stars. And as amazing as the soundtrack is, it can become a bit monotonous on your 200th hyperspace jump.

Since its release, appreciation for *Star Control II* has grown. Somewhere between cult classic and blockbuster, *Star Control II* appears on many "greatest game of all time" lists. The primary entry in the franchise, *Star Control* (1990), is still loved by fans but offers little that can't be found in *Star Control II*. The official sequel, *Star Control III* (1996), was released with updated graphics but suffered from a sterile and generic feel, lacking the personality and eccentricity that was so vital to its predecessor's success. *The Ur-Quan Masters* (2002) is a remake of *Star Control II*, with updated visuals and audio, offering a free version of the game to those without access to a 3DO or vintage PC. *Star Control: Origins* (2018) is a prequel that was received with mixed





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reviews. Graphics and controls are greatly improved, but the characters have lost some of their charm, and too much emphasis was placed on the repetitive resource-gathering aspect.

Star Control II, while obviously a sequel to *Star Control*, is often described as the spiritual successor to *Starflight*. It has directly influenced subsequent games outside the *Star Control* franchise, most notably the Mass Effect series. In fact, the first time I played *Mass Effect* (2007), I thought it had been created by the same team. Tim Cain even credited *Star Control II* for inspiring aspects of *Fallout* (1997). When *No Man's Sky* (2016) was released, it felt as though I was playing a fully realized version of *Star Control II*. While there may be no direct connection between these games, *Star Control II* has unquestionably influenced the mechanics and expectations of space action / RPGs. For its enduring legacy, whether rightly credited or not, *Star Control II* should be remembered as one of the greatest games of all time.

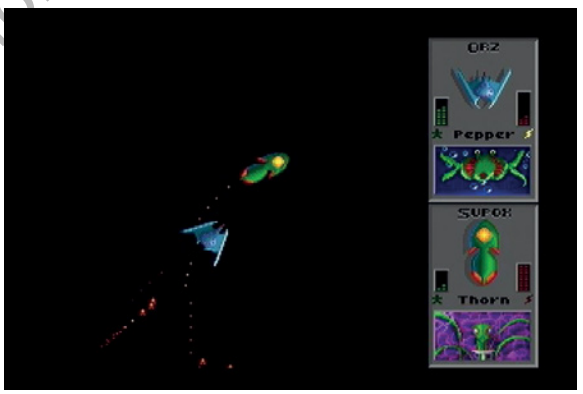
FUN FACT:

To save money, the Star Control II team held a public contest that solicited music submissions for use on the soundtrack.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Star Control II found a way to make an intricate web of intergalactic politics easily accessible. It presented poignant moral and ethical dilemmas without tarnishing the overall experience with guilt. The characters are memorable, the music is amazing, and the controls are easy to learn. The overall mood of the game is distinct, fun, and unforgettable. Most importantly, Star Control II's legacy echoes throughout many of the games we play today.

—Andy Slaven, coauthor of the Video Game Bible (2002, Trafford), writer for such publications as Game Informer, Tips & Tricks, and Toy World Magazine



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CHAPTER 68

STAR FOX 64

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON 3-D SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1997

As a regular palate cleanser during our extensive *WWF War Zone* run throughout summer and fall 2000, my brother, Dan, and I gradually worked our way through *Star Fox 64*. As we had done with other titles featuring single-player story modes, we swapped turns playing, sometimes from level to level and other times from one full game run to the next. While one of us played, the other observed, and we would compare notes in between games.

On one particular October morning, we were on a family getaway and were toiling away at attempts to beat the game on the hardest path while in the comfortable confines of my grandfather's living room. The ultimate form of *Star Fox 64*'s final boss is a massive, disembodied set of eyes and a brain. The eyes were not much of a problem, but the relentlessly stalking brain, featuring tentacles that would trap and damage the ship, gave us fits all morning.

From our unsuccessful string of attempts emerged a breakthrough. I had noticed that the brain would teleport away to another area of the battle zone after receiving a laser bombardment, regardless of if the shots had landed in its vulnerable spot. As a result, a plan began to take shape to interrupt the brain's perpetual pursuit cycle and turn the tables in our favor. By keeping the brain at an extremely close distance behind and triggering the automatic U-turn at the battle zone's boundary, my ship safely turned and passed through the brain unscathed and gained a small degree of separation that was further widened once the boost gauge recovered. At that point the offensive began. I rapidly turned the ship to face the oncoming brain and unleashed the first barrage of laser shots. As anticipated, the brain teleported a short distance away after sustaining a number of hits, so I boosted, turned, and began the next attack run. While it took a handful of additional passes, it was effective.

The central premise of *Star Fox 64*'s single-player campaign is similar to that of *Star Fox* on the Super Nintendo, but with a more fleshed-out backstory. Per the introduction, General Pepper dispatched the Star Fox team to look into suspicious activity observed on planet Venom, the home of exiled Cornerian mad scientist Andross. Upon reaching Venom, a member of the team, Pigma Dengar, turned traitor, and his two teammates, James McCloud and Peppy Hare, were taken captive as a result. Peppy freed himself and made it back to Corneria to report what had transpired. While not definitively stated, it is implied that James did not survive the encounter. Shortly thereafter, Andross put his sinister plans into effect and has been steadily conquering the Lylat system ever since. With Andross's fleet now at Corneria's doorstep, General Pepper has contracted the services of the new Star Fox team, with James McCloud's son, Fox, as its leader. Their mission: to thwart Andross's plans for system-wide domination.

The gameplay style evokes the original *Star Fox*. One assumes the role of Fox McCloud, leading his squadron of four on successive missions across a string of six worlds or interplanetary zones leading into the final showdown on the seventh planet, Venom. In the process, the player primarily pilots an interstellar fighter known as an Arwing. However, in a departure from its predecessor, the player can also operate either the ground-based Landmaster tank or a submarine called the Blue-Marine.

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Each game starts with saving Corneria, but from there the potential paths forward begin to fork, eventually forming three main paths representing distinct difficulty tiers. Opportunities to shift between paths can be earned on certain levels by meeting specific performance objectives, including (but not limited to) meeting a designated enemy kill count, defeating a boss within a certain time frame, or passing through a series of gates leading to a warp zone. This allows for ample freedom of choice when it comes to charting one's route through the Lylat system. Ultimately, all paths converge and narrow to just two before reaching planet Venom, with each yielding its own final encounter with Andross and subsequent ending.

While seemingly almost always in dire peril and in need of immediate assistance, Fox's teammates do offer some value in battle. Slippy Toad provides a visible measure of a level boss's remaining shield. Peppy Hare supplies helpful early flying tips, as well as intel throughout the game regarding the level boss's vulnerabilities. Always looking for an opportunity to one-up Fox, Falco Lombardi is adept at uncovering alternate paths that lead to special areas. Aboard the team's main transport ship, Great Fox, ROB64 occasionally radios the team and drops off a helpful care package featuring a power-up item. Two additional allies, Bill Grey and Katt Monroe, make supporting appearances during select levels.

To counter Fox's group, Andross deploys the four-member Star Wolf team, comprising squad leader Wolf O'Donnell, Andross's nephew Andrew Oikonny, Leon Powalski, and the aforementioned turncoat, Pigma Dengar. The player battles them on such worlds as Fortuna, Bolse, and Venom (arriving via Area 6).

As for armaments, the player begins with a Single Laser and a trio of Smart Bombs. However, two upgrades can be obtained in the Twin Laser and Hyper Laser, respectively, and supplemental Smart Bombs can be collected throughout the game as well. In addition to the standard laser blasts, the player now has the ability to charge up a laser blast while simultaneously engaging a target lock feature. While the process of charging up and locking on takes slightly longer than simply firing multiple standard laser shots, the effective use of a single charged shot can yield multiple kills, especially within enemy clusters. Defensively, collecting gold Shield Rings is highly beneficial, since upon acquiring three of them the player's overall shield capacity increases. Additionally, the Supply Ring, Middle Supply, and Wing Repair items are helpful in restoring durability and function after taking battle damage.

Star Fox 64 also features three head-to-head multiplayer modes. Point Match pits the players directly against each other in a contest where a point (in the form of a star) is awarded for each opponent shot down, with the first to reach a predetermined point goal declared the winner. Like Point Match, Battle Royal mode features players in direct combat, but with only one life each and the lone survivor being crowned the winner. Last, Time Trial is a contest to see which player can rack up the highest tally of enemy drone kills within a predefined window of time.

FUN FACT:

Star Fox 64 was originally intended to be Star Fox 2 for the Super Nintendo. In support of the release of Star Fox 64 3D on the Nintendo 3DS in 2011, Nintendo president and CEO Satoru Iwata interviewed four members of the development team behind the 3DS release as part of his "Iwata Asks" series on Nintendo's official website (iwataasks.nintendo.com). While discussing the development history of the franchise, Iwata asked Star Fox 64 producer Shigeru Miyamoto and Star Fox / Star Fox 2 programmer Dylan Cuthbert to expand on the circumstances surrounding the origins of Star Fox 64:

Iwata: It was that cool and you even made a new chip, so why did Star Fox 2 never go out into the world?
Miyamoto: It's something that often happens. Release gets set back about a year or so, and a half a year later the Nintendo 64 system would come out, so we were like, "Is it too late to ask people to shell out for this?"
Dylan: And it had taken time to develop Super FX Chip 2.
Miyamoto: That's right. And other companies' game consoles were using polygons all over the place, so we didn't think we could catch up even if we stuck this expensive chip in the cartridge, so we rethought it.
Amano: Oh, I see.
Miyamoto: Relatively speaking that was good, though.
Iwata: Was the reason you decided to bring out Star Fox 2, which never went on sale, in a new form for the Nintendo 64 system because you were certain you could make it for that system?
Miyamoto: Yes. By combining the all-range mode and scrolling the structure of the game was fairly established, so we wanted to use that structure from Star Fox 2 to make scenes with a stronger sci-fi bent,

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and we wanted to make Arwing feel more comfortable to fly, so (Kazuaki) Morita-san at SRD did some programming experiments with the Nintendo 64 system. When I saw those I thought, "Ah, now we can make it like a science fiction movie!"

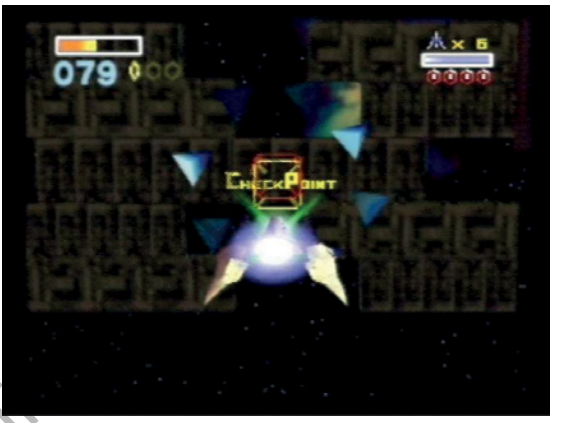
Iwata: So you were able to tell during the experimental stage that you could make it.

Miyamoto: Yeah. It started shaping up in a number of ways as soon as we began developing Star Fox 64, like with it being a shooting game even as various characters show up and you talk with them in an unfolding drama, and like how you have teammates, and if one of them gets done in by an opponent and drops out it syncs perfectly with the game.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Star Fox 64 built on the groundbreaking visual and gameplay elements of its predecessor while adding depth via a more gripping and compelling story line. The inclusion of actual speech for Fox, his teammates, his rivals, and the supporting cast went a long way toward providing that much-needed extra emotional punch. Moreover, it features one of the all-time-great quotes still lovingly exclaimed by gamers today: "Do a barrel roll!"

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary



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CHAPTER 69

STREET FIGHTER II: THE WORLD WARRIOR

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

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Long ago, virtually every grocery store in America had an arcade machine or two in its foyer. It was a place where busy parents could park their kids with a handful of quarters while they'd browse the food aisles. In retrospect, I can only imagine how leaving a young child unattended at the front entrance of a store was a bad idea, for obvious reasons. In any case, I remember stumbling across a particularly interesting game in such an environment during a family vacation in 1991. That game was *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior*.

I had already been gaming on consoles and in arcades for more than a decade by then, and I was insatiably drawn to any machine emanating the signature alluring phosphor glow of a video game monitor. When I noticed *Street Fighter II* for the first time it was love at first fight. Oddly enough, the machine was completely vacated. No one was playing it, let alone a long line of gamers waiting their turns—something that would be commonplace in the near future.

My mom bid me adieu and left to do her shopping. I stood there fixated on the machine and watched the demo run. The game looked unlike anything I had seen before. Sure, I had played beat-'em-ups such as *Double Dragon* and *Final Fight*, but *Street Fighter II* was fundamentally different in that it was strictly a one-on-one affair. Instead of fisticuffs with throngs of incoming baddies, *Street Fighter II* pitted you against an opponent in a best-two-out-of-three-rounds bout. Not only that, you could pick from one of eight different fighters, each with his or her own unique style and techniques.

After watching the demo loop a few times, I plunked a quarter into the machine. I picked Dhalsim. He was this stretchy appendage guy who I incorrectly assumed would be completely dominant due to his range. My first fight was against either Zangief the Russian wrestler or Blanka the crazy green animal guy. Despite having very little idea of how to play the game, I did okay. I mashed the six buttons in erratic fashion and pulled out a few wins, but I was by no means awesome. I noticed that Dhalsim did indeed have great range and was deceptively strong, but he was also slow. It was then when I began to realize that these fighters' many proficiencies and weaknesses were an exercise in trade-offs. One fighter excelled in speed, another excelled in range, etc. The brilliance of the game's design began to reveal itself.

That design was the brainchild of Yoshiki Okamoto, who once said, "The basic idea at Capcom was to revive *Street Fighter* [Capcom, 1987], a good game concept, to make it a better-playing arcade game." Okamoto (sometimes credited as Kihaji Okamoto) is a Japanese video game designer who produced many successful titles for Konami and Capcom. He was also involved with the development of Rockstar's Red Dead series. Okamoto later founded the company Game Republic, turning his attention to the lucrative world of mobile gaming.

Street Fighter II's development team was made up of nearly 40 Capcom team members, along with producer Noritaka Funamizu. The challenging development cycle took two years, but the final product reflected the painstaking time and effort.

In subsequent trips to local arcades I made a conscious effort to identify the strengths and weaknesses possessed by each character in terms of power, speed, stamina, range, and more. Publications such as *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *GamePro* featured in-depth strategies and guides for *Street Fighter II* in the hope of offering players some insight into the game's intricacies. When I wasn't shoveling quarters into *Street Fighter II*, I studied these magazines to more deeply understand the game to become as proficient as possible.

Not satisfied with simply generalizing strategies, I studied screenshots and character animations to better understand each fighter's hit boxes and movements frame by frame. My neighborhood buddies and I made pilgrimages to regional arcades whenever we could and oftentimes stood in lines for upward of 20 gamers deep just to get a turn. Lining up quarters on the cabinet bezel was the way to signify that you were ready to scrap. And scrap we did. We'd win some and lose some, but we always felt we improved after each battle.

In summer 1992, during a weeklong family trip to the Pocono Mountains, I bought a Super Nintendo and a copy of *Street Fighter II*. No more quarter squandering for me; I was in the big time now. I played the absolute living hell out of that cartridge. Each time the game started, I'd sprint through the options menu to properly map my controller to more closely resemble the six-button arcade layout to which I was accustomed (this completely annoyed my friends—I guess they felt it infringed upon actual playing time). The more I played, the more I came to prefer choosing Ken, a karate-type martial artist, as my main fighter.

If the Super Nintendo version of *Street Fighter II* proved one thing, it was that home console ports were becoming much more faithful to their arcade counterparts. While certainly not a 1:1 translation, *Street Fighter II* for the Super Nintendo managed to successfully capture all the key elements of the upright cabinet. While slightly scaled down graphically, most everything else was intact, from the large, iconic characters to the bumping soundtrack.

Street Fighter II was as loyal an incarnation of the arcade version as could be realistically expected, with only minor differences (e.g., only two of the three bonus stages from the arcade were included). Capcom already excelled at porting their arcade titles to 16-bit home consoles with games such as *Final Fight* (1991), so *Street Fighter II* seemed a natural fit. Further easing the transition was the six-button Super Nintendo controller, which

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mirrored the arcade's six-button layout better than any other home console of that time. In all, the Super Nintendo port of *Street Fighter II* looked, sounded, and played like the arcade version. And that was just enough to hook the masses, since *Street Fighter II* would go on to become the fifth-bestselling Super Nintendo title of all time with more than 6.3 million units sold—and the console's bestselling third-party title.

Street Fighter II was addicting, and I certainly wasn't alone. The game would become the third-highest-grossing arcade machine ever made behind *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*. *Street Fighter II* was ported to nearly every other console of its time, as well as many future machines. Additionally, *Street Fighter II* was constantly being updated, tweaked, improved, and expanded. *Street Fighter II: Champion Edition* allowed for two players to pick the same character, as well as selectability of one of the previously unplayable final-four end bosses. This led me to abandon Ken in favor of Sagat, whom I stuck with in each subsequent *Street Fighter* game and still use religiously to this day (we bald guys have to stick together).

Then there was *Street Fighter II: Turbo*, *Super Street Fighter II* . . . you get the gist. Even though *Street Fighter II* is by its very name a sequel to a previously existing one-on-one fighting game, the original *Street Fighter* had barely any impact on the arcade scene when compared to *Street Fighter II*, which popularized the fighting genre. Essentially *Street Fighter II* established the gold standard for fighting games.

Thinking back to that day at the grocery store always brings a smile to my face. Before the *Street Fighter II* craze officially hit, before the long lines at the arcade, before the press coverage, before strategy guides, before Hollywood obtained the movie rights, before Sagat's menacing visage became my lifelong gaming avatar, for just a brief moment in time it was just a machine and me. A guy frantically mashing buttons while trying to figure out how to make Dhalsim shoot flames out of his mouth again while his mom was busy buying a pot roast. And then being able to play a virtually identical port at home was icing on the proverbial cake.

FUN FACT:

Remember the two guys in front of the tall building from Street Fighter II's title screen intro? Well, according to the official Street Fighter subreddit, Capcom revealed character biographies for the two fighters as part of a Street Fighter V Shadaloo "activity report" on their Japanese website. The guy in the white T-shirt on the right side of the screen is named Scott, and the shirtless guy getting punched in the face on the left side is named Max. Neither character is a selectable fighter in Street Fighter II.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Street Fighter II's impact on the video-gaming world is undeniable. Plenty of one-on-one tournament fighters came before, such as Karate Champ (Data East, 1984), Yie Ar Kung-Fu (Konami, 1985), and the original Street Fighter, but none solidified the legitimacy of the fighting genre like Street Fighter II. It represented a quantum leap in terms of quality, challenge, replayability, and overall enjoyment. To this day it's nearly impossible to name a fighting game that doesn't somehow draw inspiration from Street Fighter II. And it was ported beautifully to the Super Nintendo.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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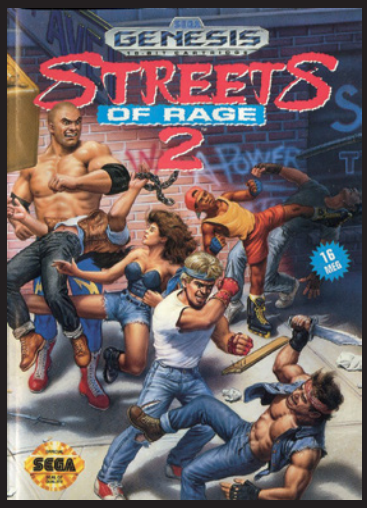
CHAPTER 70

STREETS OF RAGE 2



SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

Back in 2005 or so, when my son, Ryan, was in grade school, we played the heck out of *Streets of Rage 2*, which is widely regarded, with good reason, as the best game in the original trilogy for the Genesis. We enjoyed the hard-hitting, cooperative nature of the action and would play it when Ryan got home from school. There were weekend sessions as well, but Ryan never wanted to play the one-on-one Duel mode, because he didn't really like fighting games in the mold of *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter II*. Luckily he did enjoy beat-'em-ups such as the primary mode of this game, and it was a great title for us to enjoy some father-son time on.

A *Final Fight*–style brawler, where you'll spend a lot of time punching and kicking enemies, *Streets of Rage 2* takes place a year after the original *Streets of Rage*, which Sega released for the Genesis in 1991. Former peace officers Adam Hunter, Axel Stone, and Blaze Fielding, the playable characters in the original game, meet at their favorite nightspot to celebrate the first anniversary of their victory over the Syndicate and its leader, the mysterious Mister X, and the resultant peace and prosperity the win brought to the city. The trio catch up on things, and it's revealed that Axel works as a bodyguard, Blaze teaches dance, and Adam, who rejoined the police force, moved into a small house at the edge of the city with his teenage brother, Eddie "Skate" Hunter.

Unfortunately, the next day, after the night of revelry, Adam gets kidnapped by Mr. X and his gang, spurring criminals to reclaim the streets, gangs to roam the parks, and bomb-wielding bikers to travel the streets at night. Alex and Blaze contact authorities for help, but the Syndicate now controls the police force, so the ex-cops must strike out on their own to rescue Adam and destroy Mr. X for good. Actually they are not alone, since they are joined by the aforementioned Skate, as well as by Axel's friend Max Thunder, a professional wrestler. Each character is rated from 1 to 3 in five categories: power, technique, speed, jump, and stamina. For example, Skate is relatively weak but super quick, while Max is slow and unleashes more-powerful moves. One or two players can select from these characters on a mission through eight levels of play: Downtown, Bridge Under Construction, Amusement Park, Stadium, The Ship, Jungle, Munitions Plant, and Syndicate Stronghold.

Gameplay is similar to the already excellent original *Streets of Rage* but even better, with bigger character sprites, faster-paced gameplay, and longer, more-detailed, more-interesting levels, where you'll battle in a back alley behind a bar and aboard a moving supply truck, avoid exploding props in the Alien House attraction at the amusement park, take on waves of attackers on conveyor belts, and much more. Characters have more moves—jabs, chops, roundhouse kicks, slashes, dashes, tackles, body slams, vaults, back throws, team attacks, and the like—as do the bikers, punks, kickboxers, robots, airborne guys wearing jet packs, blade-wielding ninjas, and other enemies you'll encounter. I especially like the addition of grenade-throwing bikers, who zip across the screen and are fun to kick off their motorcycles. Interestingly, enemies now have life gauges—all of them, not just bosses—which is cool. *Streets of Rage 2* boasts 16 megs of power compared to 8 in the original game, and it shows.

While some moves are shared by characters—Axel and Blaze both perform high kicks, for example—there

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are plenty of individualized attacks. For instance, a rear attack, which is executed by pressing B + C simultaneously, is different for each character. This move makes Axel do a backhand punch, Blaze pull off a 360° foot sweep, Max execute a mule kick, and Skate perform a backflip kick.

"Bobinator," writing for Hardcoregaming 101 (www.hardcoregaming101.net), is especially enamored by the fact that you can pull off combos in the game:

> What's especially nice is that with the extra options all the characters have in their move set, there's a lot more things you can do with them. It's even possible to perform combos, given some time and practice. You might want to start off with your Down + B move while you're airborne, a weak attack that doesn't knock enemies down. While they're still stunned from the first hit, you can follow that up with a few hits of your basic combo, then finish it with your forward special to do some major damage. While something like that isn't especially hard to pull off, the fact that you can do it at all is a testament to just how much the controls and general feel of the game have improved since the original *Streets of Rage*.

No sequel is perfect, and that applies to *Streets of Rage 2*. The original *Streets of Rage* had one of the coolest, most dramatic special attacks I've ever seen. With the simple press of a button, you could call on a police car that would fire a cannon that rained down fireballs on the enemies while somehow missing the good guys. I was shocked when I discovered that this cool attack was missing from the sequel. Each playable character has two special attacks (such as Max's knuckle bomb and thunder tackle) to replace the cop car, but using these moves drains some of your life gauge, à la *Final Fight*. I didn't like that aspect of *Final Fight*, and I don't like it here.

Once again, you can pick up and use weapons (a knife, a lead pipe, a katana, a kunai, and bombs in this case), but the baseball bat, pepper shaker, and bottle weapons from the original game are gone. The only one I miss is the bottle, because after you use it once to clobber an enemy, you can use the sharp, broken end as a stabbing weapon—just like in the movies! Hard to imagine why the developers removed that (maybe it was deemed too violent?), but it's hardly a deal breaker.

Destroying certain items you'll encounter in the stages, such as drums and phone booths, reveals weapons, 1-ups, cash and gold bars (for extra points), and apples and roast chickens (for restoring life gauge energy). These items appear fairly frequently, helping give *Streets of Rage 2*, like the original game, a smooth, nonfrustrating level of difficulty. Both games have great, dance-club-style music, but the original gets the edge in this regard.

Streets of Rage 2 holds a special place in my heart. Not only is it a terrific game in a fun genre, but I have fond memories of playing it with my son a seeming

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lifetime ago in the cramped game room at our old house. At one point I bought him a Genesis off eBay so he could have one in his bedroom, so we'd play it there as well, and he also played it with his neighbor friend Tommy.

Streets of Rage 3 hit the Genesis in 1994. It is compatible with Sega's Activator body motion controller, and its control scheme takes advantage of the six-button controller. However, it took more than a quarter of a century for the fourth game in the series to finally arrive. In 2020, *Streets of Rage 4* appeared on the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch. I did indeed purchase a copy of *Streets of Rage 4* for my Switch. When it first came out in physical-media form, which was well after the download release, I passed on it at $40 because I rarely pay full retail for anything. Five months later my patience paid off, and I found a copy for $25 in a Walmart clearance bin. It came packaged with a little art booklet and a key chain (but no instruction manual), and I am absolutely having a blast playing the game. It has comic-book-style art and excellent gameplay that stays faithful to the original trilogy while including some original features, such as new special moves.

During an ice storm in February 2021 the power went out at our house, so we stayed with Ryan for a couple of days at his apartment, giving us some time to play *Streets of Rage 4* together. It was great fun, hearkening back to the good old days when he was a little fella. Ryan has turned out to be a fine young man, despite his many hours of brawling in the virtual streets, and I couldn't be prouder of him.

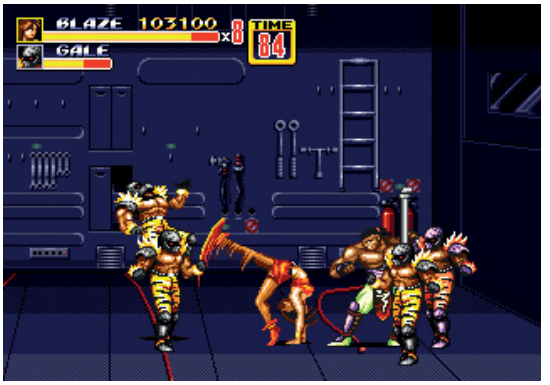
FUN FACT:

In Japan, Streets of Rage 2 is known as Bare Knuckle II. In Europe it's Streets of Rage II (note the Roman numerals). Mr. X smokes a cigar in the Japanese version, something that was removed from the US and European releases.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

With its large sprites, excellent controls, hard-hitting action, and overall entertainment factor, Streets of Rage 2 is the best beat-'em-up of the 16-bit era. And one of the greatest of all time!

—Brett Weiss



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CHAPTER 71

STRIDER

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / HACK-AND-SLASH
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA
1 PLAYER
1990

The coin-op classic *Strider*, released by Capcom in 1989, is a masterpiece of acrobatic action platforming. It's full of cinematic moments that play out during gameplay, and features the iconic ninja Hiryu, a member of the Strider organization who wields a futuristic plasma blade called a Cypher. Tasked with destroying the alien dictator Grand Master Meio, Hiryu traverses a fantastical world, his ultimate destination being Meio's headquarters—the orbiting space station Third Moon.

Strider was created as part of an ambitious multimedia project conceived as a joint venture between Capcom and the manga studio Motomiya Kikaku (now known as Thirdline) in the late '80s. This collaboration, which also gave us the *Tenchi wo Kurau* arcade and NES games, led to three intertwined products: a lengthy action/adventure game for the Nintendo Famicom, a manga that fleshed out its story, and a straightforward action arcade game using Capcom's then-new CPS board. The decision was made to give the arcade game an entirely different story to better fit a stand-alone machine. With that decided, what would the game be about?

In an interview published in 2010 on The Light Sword Cypher Mainframe website (lscmainframe.kontek.net), Koichi "Isuke" Yotsui, the lead designer of the arcade game, revealed that he "pushed for a ninja concept. We were leaning towards an action game, so a ninja setting would've been convenient. However, I didn't want to make it some old movie. Outside the Hilton's windows was a futuristic city view of Shinjuku's skyscraper district . . . the setting was decided: the near future. The hero would be derived from a ninja. We loosely decided on that."

Interestingly, while the arcade game was released worldwide, the manga was released only in Japan. The proposed Famicom game, *Strider Hiryu*, was canceled, but it was released in the United States for the Nintendo Entertainment System after being made fully playable, and a rudimentary English translation was slapped on to it.

Sometime in early 1990 I rented the NES version of *Strider* from Video Plus, a local mom-and-pop store. This was the first game in the franchise that I played, and I found it confusing and not much fun. I was looking more for a straightforward actioner, not a lengthy adventure with exploration elements and item management. As such, I returned it to Video Plus that Monday and didn't think about *Strider* again, at least not until Sega released their port of the arcade game a few months later. In magazine ads the company hailed it as being "the first and only 8-meg game ever."

My best friend Chris got *Strider* for the Genesis shortly after release and brought it to my house. It was exactly what I had hoped the NES game would be: nonstop action, coupled with great graphics, excellent control, and a fantastic soundtrack. Even better, he forgot to take the game home with him! And he couldn't come back to my house for a week—and what a week that was! I spent so much time playing *Strider* that I got to where I could blast right through it in a short time, and ever since then it's been one of my favorite games.

Strider begins in the city of Kazakh in the year 2048. Hiryu hang-glides deep into the city and immediately springs into action as Meio's troops rush out to fight him. After defeating the gigantic robotic centipede

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Oroboros, Hiryu journeys to the Siberian wilderness, confronting a giant robot ape, the Mecha Pon, as well as his recurring nemesis Solo (a Boba Fett–esque bounty hunter hired by Meio to kill Hiryu) for the first time. He then boards a small aircraft, where he fights the Kuniang M.A. Team—three sisters who are adept in the martial arts.

From here, the aircraft takes Hiryu to the flying battleship Ballog, which he fights his way through, ultimately destroying the power source of the mighty warship (amusingly described by Hiryu as a "toy" during one of the cutscenes). As the Ballog explodes in the skies over the Amazon basin, Hiryu lands and fights off a tribe of Amazons and a herd of dinosaurs, eventually battling the robotic *Tyrannosaurus rex*, Lagos. Finally, Hiryu reaches The Third Moon, where all of the bosses return for a rematch. Upon reaching the top of the station, Hiryu engages in a climactic battle against Meio. Emerging victorious, he hang glides back to Earth as The Third Moon explodes.

The graphics are lush and exquisitely detailed—every stage features a unique look that fits the area of the world that Hiryu's traveled to. The music and sound effects are also top notch, from the metallic "SHING!" whenever Hiryu swings his Cypher, to the maniacal laughter of Meio, to the heroic stage themes tinged with a sense of urgency. The stages are populated with a variety of humanoid and robotic enemies, most capable of being destroyed with a slash or two. One robot in particular, the Rascal, sports a Davy Crockett–style coonskin cap.

When asked in the aforementioned interview why the Rascals wear fur hats, Yotsui replied, "I like fur hats. The initial designs had something in there about making the robots wear clothes. Why are robots and aliens always naked? I imagined that a silver robot wearing a suit from Savile Row would look cool. But we wound up cutting the number of enemies to the bare minimum and the stylish robots didn't make it, and we were left with the military-style ones found in the final game. The only remnants of that idea that actually made it to the game were the raccoon skin hats."

Hiryu has several power-ups at his disposal: one that extends the range of his Cypher for a limited time, one that grants him invincibility, one that extends his life bar, and two that restore Hiryu's energy. In addition to the Cypher, Hiryu can obtain various robots that work with him, including a robotic hawk and a two-legged, mushroom-shaped drone. If he picks up two drones at once, they'll combine to form a robotic panther that wreaks havoc on enemies. Hiryu can also grab 1-ups for extra lives.

Hiryu is extremely agile. He can climb nearly any surface by using his climbing hook, and when he jumps, he gracefully leaps and does a midair cartwheel. Then there are those playable cinematic moments. A great example is midway through Siberia, right after the first battle with Solo. Hiryu races down a hill as land mines explode behind him, picking up speed as he goes, until he reaches the bottom of the hill, when he must jump to clear the chasm that suddenly appears. That was the closest thing I'd experienced at the time to actually playing an action movie, instead of just watching one.

Sega handled the Genesis port in-house with some assistance from Capcom's arcade division. The game was originally intended to be a 6-meg cart, but 2 extra megs were added so that the arcade version could be ported accurately, and the end result shows that this was a wise move on Sega's part. Aside from some minor changes, including the removal of certain background elements, several animation routines, and the voices used in the arcade cutscenes, pretty much everything remains intact. Some of the graphics had to be redrawn, but this is no big deal. The ending was changed, showing Hiryu's escape from The Third Moon as it blows up.

Despite these changes, it's still widely considered to be one of the best and most accurate home ports of *Strider* ever made. The only real negative is that the controls aren't as smooth as they are in the arcade original. They can feel a little stiff at times, and Hiryu doesn't quite move as fluidly as a result.

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Strider was ported to many home consoles and PCs, mostly by UK-based developer Tiertex, which were in turn published by US Gold. These include the PC Engine, as one of the few Arcade Card CD titles; the Japanese exclusive Sharp X68000 PC; and the PlayStation as the pack-in with *Strider 2* (itself a port of Capcom's 1999 arcade sequel to the original game). This has since been followed by multiple rereleases of the original game for various consoles, starting with the PlayStation 2, Xbox, and PlayStation Portable and continuing to this day. The Genesis port has been reissued several times, most recently on 2019's Sega Genesis Mini.

Koichi "Isuke" Yotsui left Capcom shortly after *Strider* was released, and later produced two games of particular interest to *Strider* fans: the arcade exclusive *Osman* / *Cannon Dancer* (Mitchell Corp., 1996), which he described as an "irregular sequel" to *Strider*, and the multiplayer-oriented *Moon Diver* (Square-Enix, 2011) for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. *Strider* itself was revived and reimagined by Capcom in 2014 for the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Steam.

FUN FACT:

Tiertex maintained the rights to release their own Strider sequels for a time as long as they didn't use the Hiryu character, which was still co-owned by Thirdline.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

If you're looking for a blast of fast, fun, stylish action, Strider should be on your must-play list.

—Rob Strangman, author of Memoirs of Virtual Caveman, coadministrator of the Strider fan site Light Sword Cypher Mainframe

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CHAPTER 72

SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
1 PLAYER
1991

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A hallmark of an all-time-great game is one that can bring enjoyment even in the unlikeliest of situations. In fall 2004, my brother, Dan, and I were enlisted by our folks to repaint the front porch of our home. While we accepted the task, our enthusiasm level for the undertaking was tantamount to that felt when one is about to have a wisdom tooth extracted. Our salvation from drudgery came in the form of spirited discourse regarding our most recent gaming obsession at that time, *Super Castlevania IV*. In the weeks prior, we had dedicated myriad hours after school and work to forging our path through the game, while swapping the controller at each level clear or continue. By the time our painting project came along, we had just recently conquered the game for the first time but were still very much invested in replaying to improve the proficiency of our play. The lively exchange of new tactical ideas for situations such as the final sequence of bosses within the game made the time fly and a mundane task all the more bearable.

As with the previous entries in the series, the core plot of *Super Castlevania IV* remains a simple one. Dracula has once again arisen from his century-long dirt nap, and, along with his army of demonic minions, he is hellbent on draining the life from Transylvania and its surrounding lands. As a member of the famed Belmont vampire hunting clan, it is up to you, in the role of Simon Belmont, to defang his efforts yet again.

Much like the game's story line, the gameplay offers a healthy dose of the familiar. Your central weapon remains the whip, with three levels of potency: standard leather, short-range Morning Star, and long-range Morning Star. Also available throughout the game are the standard array of specialty subweapons such as the fire bomb, axe, dagger, watch, and boomerang, along with the double-shot and triple-shot subweapon rapidity amplifiers. Moreover, it would not be a classic *Castlevania* romp without the occasional candle or wall-based meat product to replenish Simon's lost health.

While the whip's three phases have remained relatively unchanged, its range and usefulness have been drastically increased. Previously, a whip strike could be delivered horizontally only while standing, squatting, or jumping. In *Super Castlevania IV*, whip strikes can be delivered at several new angles, including diagonally, vertically, downward while jumping, and in a malleable but slightly weaker manner by using the d-pad to wave the whip out in front of Simon or dangle it down upon enemies from overhead platforms. In an exciting new twist, the whip can also be used as a grappling hook in certain situations, allowing one to hang or swing over hazards and obstacles.

With 11 levels to traverse, *Super Castlevania IV* features a wide array of deadly terrain to overcome and undead baddies to vanquish. Alongside established level obstacle favorites such as the gears in the Clock Tower stage, the game introduces new deadly additions such as rooms that rotate on an axis, sections where one must hitch a ride on a moving chain, and staircases that fall away after contact. The level boss lineup includes several *Castlevania* franchise mainstays such as Medusa,

The Monster (a.k.a. Frankenstein's monster), Death (a.k.a. The Grim Reaper), and ultimately Dracula, while also introducing some new and interesting foes such as the treasure-infused Zapf Bat and the Dancing Spectres: Paula Abghoul and Fred Askare.

While the game is similar in many respects to its immediate predecessor, *Super Castlevania IV* has received some criticism from fans throughout the years regarding two key ways in which it differs from *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. First, *Super Castlevania IV* contains only a single, linear progression levelwise from start to finish, whereas *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse* offers multiple possible routes via forks in the path between certain levels that enable the player to choose the next destination from two available options. Second, *Super Castlevania IV* does not feature the selectable companion character option introduced in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. Consequently, Simon is once again left to face Dracula and his hellacious hordes all by his lonesome.

In an interview featured in issue 119 of *Retro Gamer* magazine, *Super Castlevania IV's* director and main programmer, Masahiro Ueno (listed in the game's credit sequence under the pseudonym "Jun Furano"), shed some light on the likely reason for these missing elements:

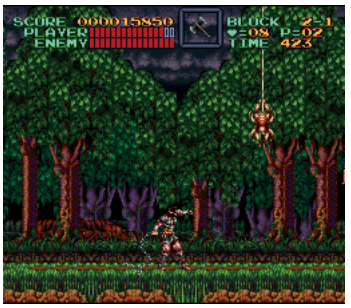
> *CVIII* on the Famicom was developed almost in parallel with *CVIV*, by the same people behind *CV* and *CVII*. *CVIII* is a great game though. If *CVIII* had [already been released] before we started *CVIV*, I would have followed that direction."

When later asked about anything he would do differently with *Super Castlevania IV* if given the opportunity and with the benefit of hindsight, Ueno declared, "I would probably add more branches to give the players a sense of exploration as found in other *Castlevania* games."

As with its predecessors, *Super Castlevania IV* features a veritable feast for the ears via its soundtrack. The franchise's first foray into the 16-bit era takes full advantage of the SNES's robust sound palette. Within the first level, one is welcomed into the fray by the epic strains of "Simon Belmont's Theme," just one of a number of emotionally stirring pieces to make their debut in this title. In the latter stages of the game, one is treated to inspirational renditions of previous *Castlevania* masterpieces "Bloody Tears" and "Vampire Killer." In the aforementioned *Retro Gamer* magazine interview, Masahiro Ueno spoke to the role that the game's soundtrack had in immersing players into the *Super Castlevania IV* experience: "In addition to the new gameplay, I wanted to make the environment more interactive and lively. The music and sound effects really contributed to make the game's atmosphere spooky and real. So I am proud of the atmosphere we created."

FUN FACT:

Before climbing the stairs to commence the final showdown with Dracula, executing a well-timed leap of faith onto an invisible platform in the area directly under the staircase and walking all the way to the left edge of the screen will net one a king's ransom in power-ups, hearts, and life-boosting meat, greatly improving the odds of emerging from the forthcoming fight triumphant. However, be warned, the return trek to the main staircase's starting point on the far right side is a bit more perilous than the initial journey leftward to the power item treasure trove, since one must carefully locate and ascend an invisible set of stairs to reach the same invisible platform to which they had jumped initially. Failure to heed this warning could lead to one's untimely demise at victory's doorstep.



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WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The first three NES Castlevania games are legendary in their own right. With Super Castlevania IV, Konami wisely decided not to reinvent the wheel. Instead, they retained the formula in terms of story and gameplay that they had successfully established in the previous entries, while also fully leveraging the expanded capabilities of the SNES to build on and enhance those base elements. Ultimately, what one gets with Super Castlevania IV is nearly everything beloved about its predecessors, but dialed up to 11. Graphically stunning, sonically inspiring, and a joy to play, Super Castlevania IV was a no-brainer selection for this top 100 list.

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary

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CHAPTER 73

SUPER GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / PLATFORM SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
1 PLAYER
1991

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I have a deep love/hate relationship with *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. It remains one of my all-time favorites, despite its excruciating challenge. Some have hailed it the *Dark Souls* of its time. I don't think they remember just how unforgiving the game was. *Dark Souls* is typically considered challenging yet fair; playing *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, on the other hand, was masochistic.

The Ghosts 'N Goblins series, of which *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is a noteworthy entry, has a legacy of being one of the hardest in all of gaming, and *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is arguably the most challenging of the bunch. This extreme difficulty stems from the series' arcade roots, where it was designed as a quarter-muncher. Creator Tokuro Fujiwara noted that while designing the original arcade *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, Capcom did location testing for the game, and he would meticulously watch players, taking note of areas where they weren't dying—so that he could hurry back to work and redo those portions to make them more difficult and have the game swallow more quarters.

While *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts* was a console original, it retained the punishing formula of its arcade predecessors, demanding nothing short of perfection from the player. With one hit robbing you of armor and then another hit stealing your life, you were constantly near death. Randomly spawning enemies would incessantly surround you, requiring quick reflexes and smart platforming to avoid them, and terrain would change in front of you when you least expected it.

Levels couldn't just be played—they had to be learned and memorized.

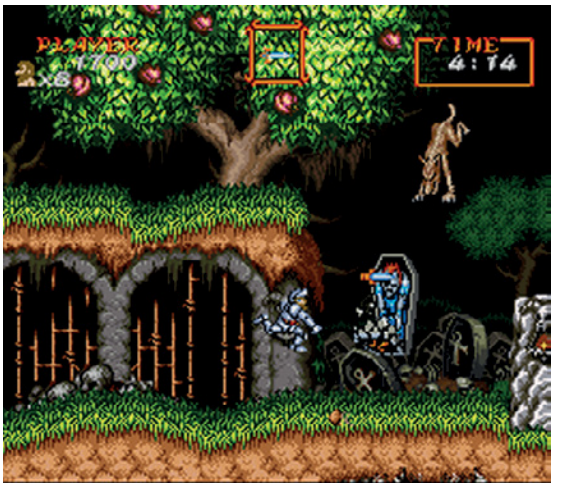
While this sequel introduced a major gameplay improvement in the form of double jumps, the jumps themselves retained the unforgiving behavior from the game's predecessors: once airborne the player had no control of direction or momentum, like they would in most platformers. Which was painfully frustrating in situations where enemies would spawn directly in your path. The occasional frame rate slowdown from too many enemies on screen at once didn't help matters. But the ability to push players' patience to the limits was perhaps no better exemplified than its ending. Following series tradition, upon completion players were sent all the way back to the beginning and forced to play through the entire game *again* to get the proper ending. And mind you, there were no game saves; it had to be done in one sitting.

And yet, those who learned and mastered the game were treated to a remarkable 16-bit platforming experience, arguably one of the console's best. That was the point; the extreme challenge made the reward of playing through the whole thing that much greater.

I first fell in love with the Ghosts 'N Goblins series with the Genesis version of the original *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, masterfully programmed by Sega's Yuji Naka before he went on to head the creation of the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise. (It was apparently so faithful to the arcade version that Fujiwara noted that it even contained some of the same bugs.) A launch title for

the Genesis, the game seemed magical to me. The settings were inventive, and the weapons you'd find were all uniquely powerful. Sir Arthur losing his armor and running around in his underwear or being turned into a duck offered some cruel levity. Impressive boss battles were also a highlight.

Then came *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. Like *Castlevania*, *Contra*, *Metroid*, and so many other iconic franchises of the time, the "Super" in the title represented everything we loved about those games, but was enhanced thanks to the Super Nintendo's graphics chip for Mode 7 effects and Sony's S-SMP sound chip (designed by Sony's Ken Kutaragi for Nintendo before he became father of the PlayStation) for higher-quality audio. *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts* used both impeccably. The fourth level, Ghouls' Stomach, was particularly impressive, with the entire level rotating around you. The iconic graveyard music theme by Ayako Mori sounded better than ever. It was everything I wanted in a Super Nintendo sequel. And despite an even-greater difficulty, the fantastic settings, bosses, soundtrack, and new weapons were all that were needed for me to persevere.



Fujiwara has been a remarkable force in the gaming industry and is worthy of far more recognition than he has received. In addition to creating and programming *Bionic Commando*, he served as producer on the Mega Man and Final Fight series and helped shape a lot of the games coming out of Capcom in the '90s. *Resident Evil* owes a lot to him, since it was directly inspired by his Japan-only NES game *Sweet Home*. Fujiwara was also producer on the game and ultimately made the call to shift it to third-person instead of first-person, as it originally was supposed to be after he saw the perspective in *Alone in the Dark*.

Following *Resident Evil*, Fujiwara left Capcom to create his own studio, Whoopee Camp (known for the Tomba! series), and later a subsidiary studio for Sony called Deep Space. In more-recent years Fujiwara has been a consultant to multiple companies, working as a designer on such games as *MadWorld* for Platinum Games. But despite all of his projects, Fujiwara has always found time for the Ghosts 'N Goblins series, and he returned to direct both *Ultimate Ghost 'N Goblins* for the PSP and, more recently, *Ghosts 'N Goblins Resurrection* on the Switch. According to Fujiwara, he hopes that he's created a legacy with the series where players feel a certain sense of great accomplishment when they've finally conquered a challenge that wasn't easy to overcome.

Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts was recently brought back into the spotlight with inclusion in both the SNES Classic mini console library and as part of the Nintendo Switch Online service. Playing it again now, it's amazing how my muscle memory for the game remains after all these years. But the time or patience to master it like I did in my youth has sadly passed. While I don't foresee myself defeating Emperor Sardius and saving the princess again anytime soon, I love revisiting the game and fondly remembering that feeling of accomplishment from what now seems like a lifetime ago.

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FUN FACT:

The red pattern on Arthur's boxers aren't hearts, as commonly assumed, but rather strawberries. According to Fujiwara, they were a gift from the princess and act as a charm to protect Arthur in battle.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

In the ongoing debate about difficulty in games, Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts serves as the poster child for extreme difficulty being integral to its appeal. Does this exclude a large set of players? Absolutely. Will only a small percentage see all the game has to offer? Unfortunately. But for those who have braved and mastered the experience—oh, what a sense of accomplishment it is.

—Sam Kennedy, 1UP.com cofounder and former editorial director, cofounder, and executive producer at Tigertron

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CHAPTER 74

SUPER MARIO 64

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: 3-D PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 PLAYER
1996

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At one point in the documentary *Playing with Power: The Nintendo Story* (2021, Mediajuice Studios), you will see little ol' me waxing rhapsodic about the greatness of *Super Mario 64*. I appear at various other points in the program, discussing different aspects of the history of Nintendo, but my *Super Mario 64* clip is the one the company sent me to help publicize my TV debut. The Nintendo 64 launch title changed video games forever, giving the most famous video game character of all time a new look and gameplay type and influencing everything from *Banjo-Kazooie* to *Spyro the Dragon* to even the open-world action of *Grand Theft Auto III*.

Just as the original *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) invented the side-scrolling platformer (previous titles that broke ground on the genre, such as 1982's *Pitfall!*, didn't truly scroll), *Super Mario 64* pioneered the 3-D platformer. In earlier games in the series, Mario ran primarily from left to right in largely linear fashion, hopping on enemies to defeat them. There were secrets and surprises in the games, and Mario was an agile character who could perform a variety of actions (walk, run, jump, crouch, punch bricks, climb, swim), but *Super Mario 64* brought a new dimension to the series literally and figuratively. Not only that, the game changed the emphasis from platforming to exploring and collecting items.

From the moment you boot up the game, you know you are in for something special. In the intro, Mario's face, shown huge in 3-D close-up, says, "It's me, Mario! Hello!" After a little more preamble, Mario jumps out of a warp pipe in front of Princess Toadstool/Peach's castle, yelling, "Yahoo!" In that open area you can experiment with the controls to discover Mario's new skill set (with him shouting excitedly at every move), which I'll get to in a bit. In 1996, it was stunning to see Mario come to life in three dimensions—he seemed more lifelike and more "real" than ever before. Mario has been called the Mickey Mouse of video games, and you certainly get that cartoon vibe here. The story line is familiar—the turtleshelled baddie Bowser has kidnapped the Princess, and Mario must rescue her—but the gameplay is not. At least it wasn't at the time.

Super Mario 64 makes excellent use of the revolutionary analog stick on the N64 controller, which was as groundbreaking as the game itself (Sony and Sega would develop their own analog sticks a short time later). Mario moves in the direction you direct the control stick, of course, but the farther you tilt the stick away from the center, the faster Mario will move. More versatile than ever before, Mario, in addition to previous moves, can now tiptoe, crawl, punch enemies, kick, perform slide attacks and somersaults, slide while crouching, and even fly, as hinted at by the box art depicting Mario with his arms and wings spread wide. He can pick up and throw bombs. He can pick up and throw certain enemies. He can do a ground pound maneuver to destroy blocks, squash enemies (including such familiars as Goombas, Koopas, and Chain Chomps), and smash certain objects into the ground. By combining a standard jump with other actions, he can jump-kick, long jump, backflip, continuous jump, and double and triple jump. This is one movable Mario!

There are 15 main worlds in *Super Mario 64*, each of which is a virtual playground that is fun to explore. These are linked together within Peach's castle, which acts as a hub area, an aspect of play that countless

games have borrowed from. As you explore the hallways and rooms, you will encounter paintings that act as portals to the worlds, including Bob-omb Battlefield; Whomp's Fortress; Jolly Roger Bay; Cool, Cool Mountain; Big Boo's Haunt; Hazy Maze Cave; Lethal Lava Land; Shifting Sand Land; Dire, Dire Docks; Snowman's Land; Wet-Dry World; Tall, Tall Mountain; Tiny-Huge Island; Tick Tock Clock; and Rainbow Ride. Each world is filled with secrets and bonuses, and each has seven golden stars that Mario must collect to unlock additional areas in the castle. There are 15 extra stars for a total of 120. You can beat the game without finding them all (you'll need at least 70 when played the traditional way—speed runners have found ways to finish the game with zero stars), but it's certainly fun to try. The ultimate goal is to locate and defeat Bowser in a series of three one-on-one boss battles.

Since *Super Mario 64* was the first game of its type, it's no surprise that it's not perfect, even exhibiting some growing pains for the genre. Much has been said over the years about the problematic camera. Plus, the game is not as intuitive or as easy to "pick up and play" as 2-D entries in the series, which is less of a problem for fans of these types of games than it is a feature.

Writing for IGN (www.ign.com) when the website was new in 1996, Doug Perry summed it up nicely: "The game is initially less accessible than previous Mario titles, although the three-pronged analog controller isn't really where the difficulty lies . . . the biggest obstacle in the game is finding the correct viewpoint. The camera, which moves on its own (unless directed manually by using the four gold buttons), tries to find the optimal angle to view the action, though occasionally you're simply not able to see where you're going. Additionally, frustration sets in as you spin the camera around while simultaneously attempting to run across a moving plank or tip-toe across a tiny ledge. But getting the hang of *SM64* is all a matter of practice, and as soon as you catch on, you will execute these skills unconsciously."

That was certainly my experience playing the game. In short order I found myself guiding Mario with ease as he hopped on moving platforms, gathered up eight red coins in succession, ran up and slid down mountains, got shot out of a canon, raced a giant penguin, tiptoed past sleeping Chain Chomps, helped a snowman reattach his missing head, rode Big-Boo's merry-go-round, dodged flying books and rolling boulders, entered igloos and pyramids, rode a flying carpet, talked to Toad, rode a bunny, and much, much more, all backed by a terrific score by Koji Kondo. Even with the limitations of the cartridge format, the game sounds great, and, of course, load times are nonexistent, unlike with many PlayStation and Sega Saturn games.

In addition to playing and sounding like a champ, *Super Mario 64* looks nice. Perry summed up the graphical appeal of the game while acknowledging that it does have some visual flaws: "Despite all of their saccharin-sweet cuteness, the graphics are magnificent. Shigeru Miyamoto's dream of producing an interactive cartoon

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has been fully realized—the animation is lavish, the textures rich, and even the most superfluous touches have been completely executed. *SM64* is not perfect, however. Despite the efficiency of the hardware's LOD Management draw-in is noticeable, and occasionally gamers will look right through walls or objects. Still, this is as close to perfection a game has ever been."

While *Super Mario 64* may not appear "close to perfection" in the eyes of the modern gamer who has honed his platform-hopping skills on *Super Mario 3D World* and *Super Mario Odyssey*, it is nevertheless one of the most historically important games in the history of the industry. More germane for the purposes of this book, it is still a blast to play. Back in the day *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (September 1996) called it an "instant classic" for good reason.

FUN FACT:

Super Mario 64 was the first game where Mario can lose his cap. When not wearing it he takes more damage than usual. Caps also give him different powers in the game. The wing cap lets him fly. While wearing the metal cap he can bounce off enemies and walk on the sea floor, and he won't be affected by flames, water, or toxic gases. The vanish cap lets him walk through wire nets and special walls and pass through flames and an enemy's body with impunity.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Eleven years after Super Mario Bros. changed the industry by pioneering the side-scrolling platformer, Super Mario 64 broke ground on the 3-D platformer, influencing countless games to follow and changing the industry forever. The game is an expansive virtual playground and an interactive cartoon that you should enjoy exploring for many hours.

—Brett Weiss

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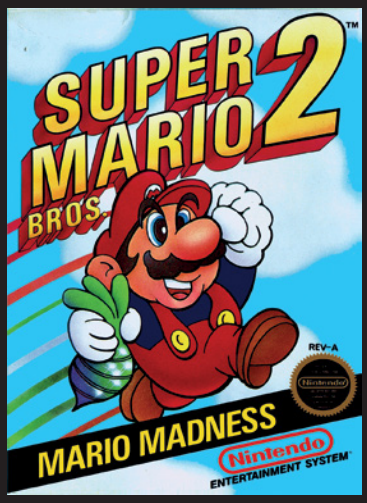
CHAPTER 75

SUPER MARIO BROS. 2



NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO
1 PLAYER
1988

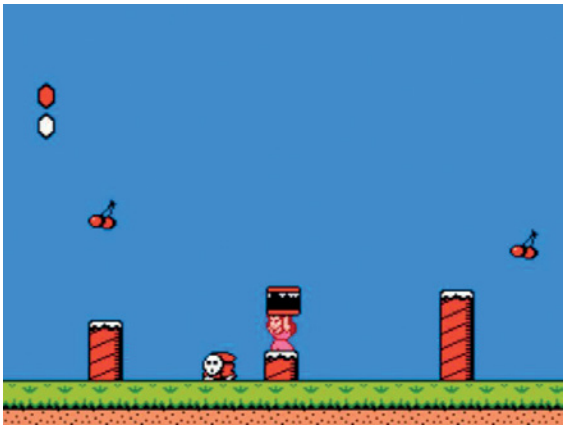
Schiffer Publishing, Ltd.

I don't recall the first time I encountered *Super Mario Bros. 2*, but I do remember the game and the pixelated 8-bit jazz it worked on my soul as a nine-year-old kid who dreamed of being a game developer. It was likely at my cousin's house in early 1990. At the time, her best friend's father happened to be a regional manager or such for Lionel Playworld toy stores and had a nearly complete library of NES games (up to that point, of course). My cousin would regularly take me over to her friend's house to check out all the latest releases. I'd had an NES for only about a year by then, so I was playing catch-up with five years of amazing games.

My parents had stipulated that I couldn't get any new games until I'd beaten the ones I already had, so I spent the rest of that year mastering the original *Super Mario Bros*. As good as that game was, it was merely a stepping stone for me on the path to something far more enticing and much more creative. Miraculously, *Super Mario Bros. 2* was beneath the Christmas tree that year, the first boxed NES game I ever got.

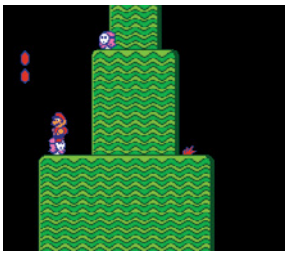
I quickly became obsessed with the game, never mind that *Super Mario Bros. 3* had actually just released stateside only a few weeks prior. As an aspiring artist, I was mesmerized by the uniqueness of *Super Mario Bros. 2*'s characters, creatures, and environments. Not only were they a vast graphical improvement, but they were such a bold departure from its predecessor's designs. Four playable characters with totally unique sprites? Unbelievable! Free-scrolling horizontal *and* vertical levels? Sorcery! I *don't* jump on enemies to defeat them? Madness, I say! No score, no timer, no multiplayer (arguably the game's only real shortcoming)? This was indeed a brave new world with new rules, new challenges, and limitless possibilities.

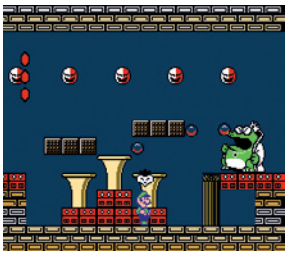
For all its creative splendor and innovation, though, that brave new world almost never happened. The story behind the development of *Super Mario Bros. 2* is as legendary as the game itself. In 1986, Nintendo Co. Ltd. released a direct sequel to *Super Mario Bros*. for the Famicom Disk System, the Japan-only disk-based peripheral for the NES's Japanese counterpart. Simply titled *Super Mario Bros. 2*, the game was more an expansion than a true sequel, featuring challenging new levels and gameplay mechanics such as wind, poisonous mushrooms, and unique physics for Mario and Luigi, respectively. Aesthetically, though, the game looked and sounded identical to the first *Super Mario Bros.* Fearing that the game's heightened difficulty and recycled visuals would fail to appeal to American gamers, Nintendo of America reluctantly but prudently chose not to localize the game,



despite desperately needing a new title to bolster their flagship franchise.

Coincidently, many of the developers from the original *Super Mario Bros.* team had recently been involved in the creation of a unique platforming game developed in a joint venture between Nintendo and Fuji Television for the Japanese broadcast company's *Yume Kojo '87* ("Dream Factory") promotional event. Built on an earlier prototype designed by Nintendo's Kensuke Tanabe, *Yume Kojo: Doki Doki Panic* was released for the Famicom Disk System in 1987 and featured four playable characters in an Arabian-themed dreamland with gameplay heavily influenced by *Super Mario Bros.* (the game's soundtrack was even composed by Koji Kondo). Under pressure to quickly deliver a Western viable Mario sequel, Nintendo Co. Ltd. pitched the idea of repurposing *Doki Doki Panic* with Mario-themed characters to Nintendo of America. The concept was enthusiastically approved, and the *Super Mario Bros.* team, overseen by designer Kensuke Tanabe and producer Shigeru Miyamoto, immediately set about creating new character art and fleshing out design elements of the Famicom game.





The game's story and general presentation were altered to better accommodate the Mario franchise, while gameplay remained largely identical to the previously released Japanese game, allowing for a quick development turnaround. *Super Mario Bros. 2*, as we know it in the West, was released to nearly universal acclaim and explosive consumer demand on October 10, 1988. The game would go on to sell more than seven million copies, becoming the fourth-bestselling NES title of all time and claiming the unique honor of being the bestselling NES title never included as a pack-in game. The game's Western success led to it being rereleased as a Famicom cartridge in Japan two years later with the title *Super Mario USA*.

Like its predecessor, *Super Mario Bros. 2* is a side-scrolling platformer starring Nintendo's famed plumber mascot Mario and his brother Luigi. This time Mario and Luigi are joined by Princess Toadstool (Peach) and her mushroom retainer, Toad, as they set off on a magical quest to save the dreamland of Subcon from the dastardly plans of the maniacal Wart, the frog king bent on turning the dreamland into a world of nightmares with his Dream Machine. Selectable at the beginning of every level, each of the four playable characters has unique strengths and weaknesses regarding jumping and lifting: Mario has average jumping and strength, Luigi can jump high and far, Princess Toadstool can actually hover for extended periods of time thanks to her dress, and Toad can't jump all that well, but his lifting and throwing ability is tops.

Our heroes must venture through seven unique worlds (a total of 20 sprawling levels) featuring horizontal- and vertical-scrolling segments, indoor and outdoor environments, and multiple paths, aided along the way by flying carpets and even rockets. The fantastic worlds range from a tropical oasis of green hills and waterfalls, through a vast desert of quicksand and ancient pyramids, across a frozen ocean with spouting whales and floating icebergs, and finally to a palace of dreams floating among the clouds. With nary a Goomba or Koopa Troopa in sight, Wart has his own army of minions wreaking havoc across Subcon: Shyguys, bullet-spitting Snifits, slithering Cobrats, ice-skating Flurries, and ill-tempered Bob-ombs, just to name a few.

Each enemy type has unique behaviors, requiring the player to actually think before leaping. *Super Mario Bros. 2*'s biggest change to the Mario formula is doing away with simply jumping on enemies to defeat them: the player must now pick up and toss objects such as mushroom blocks, vegetables, or even other creatures at enemies to defeat them. The introduction of unique boss characters is also a big upgrade from Mario's previous adventure. Most levels end with the miniboss Birdo, who tosses eggs (and sometimes fireballs) while guarding the crystal balls that are used to open the exit of each level. The final level of each world features a well-designed boss fight against Wart's most dangerous agents, including the bomb-tossing Mouser, the three-headed fire-breathing serpent Tryclyde, the boulder-tossing crab Clawgrip, and the living-flame Fryguy, and ultimately a showdown with Wart himself and his Dream Machine. Each boss encounter is surprisingly intense and requires quick thinking and adaptation from the player, with plenty of room for experimentation.

Super Mario Bros. 2 is fundamentally the same as *Doki Doki Panic*, but the game is far from a mere reskin. Core mechanics, such as holding the B button to run and getting shrunk when you have only one remaining

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hit point, were added to make the game more *Mario*esque, but elements in *Doki Doki Panic* such as Power Stars, 1-up mushrooms, and coins (this time used in a slot machine minigame to earn extra lives at the end of each level) were actually borrowed from *Super Mario Bros.* to begin with, bringing the game's design full circle: it was always a *Mario* game.

With no water levels, breakable bricks, or green pipes, though, *Super Mario Bros. 2* is certainly different for a Mario title, but its contributions to the franchise set the foundation for many ideas that have since become franchise staples (Mario's health gauge wouldn't be seen again until *Super Mario 64*, 18 years later). Overall the game is more challenging than its predecessor, but fairly and intelligently so, making for an imaginative and unique experience as a truly innovative and groundbreaking sequel that took huge creative risks that broke conventions in ways that few sequels ever dare.

FUN FACT:

Super Mario Bros. 2 was the cover feature of the premier issue of Nintendo Power magazine in July 1988. Nintendo of America mailed out more than 600,000 free copies of the magazine to gamers throughout North America to announce Mario's next big adventure.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

A flagrant defiance of players' expectations and the game design conventions of its day, Super Mario Bros. 2 immensely expanded the creative potential of one of gaming's most successful franchises and set the precedent for how Nintendo handles development of its character driven IPs to this day.

—Kale Menges, game developer and artist

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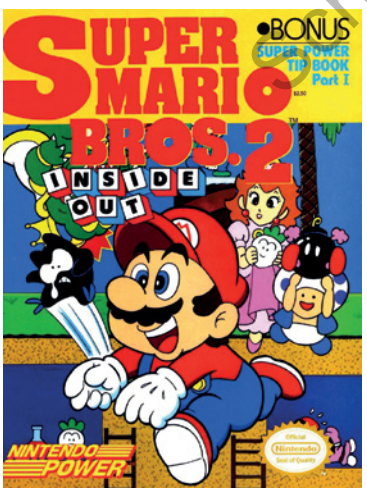

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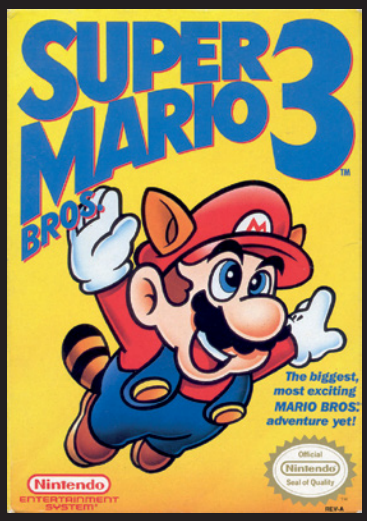
SUPER MARIO BROS. 3



NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D4
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (ALTERNATING)
1990

In summer 1990, I had one clear and deeply dedicated mission: to convince my parents to finally get me a Nintendo Entertainment System for my birthday that August. Having spent the few years prior falling in love with Nintendo's little two-toned gray box by proxy at the homes of multiple friends, my desire to own one hit its zenith with the release of *Super Mario Bros. 3*.

My first experience with the game came early that summer while visiting extended family who had rented a house at the beach. While taking in my surroundings within the cozy rental space shortly after our arrival, my eyes locked in on a nearby table, upon which sat a small portable television with the NES connected to it. At the first available opportunity I went in for a closer inspection. My eyes widened to saucers when I spotted the cartridge with the distinctive yellow label.

After months of buildup and hype, my time to try this game was finally at hand. I quickly requested permission to play, and once it was granted, I flew back to that tiny television like there were rockets strapped to my feet. I was blown away right from the opening curtain reveal. The layout of the World 1 map was a

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feast for my neophyte eyes. However, without a shadow of a doubt, the most memorable moment of that very brief introductory experience came upon obtaining the Super Leaf / Raccoon power-up and, after a bit of trial and error, taking flight for the first time.

Later, as we headed home from the shore, my mind was hard at work, crafting a compelling case to make NES ownership a reality. *Super Mario Bros. 3* had to be mine. By summer's end an NES graced our living-room entertainment center, and my Mario journey had resumed.

The ultimate objective of *Super Mario Bros. 3* is a familiar one. While Bowser's endgame mirrors that of the original *Super Mario Bros.*, his machinations are far more elaborate. This time around he has made it a family affair. With the aid of his seven offspring, known collectively as the Koopa Kids, Bowser toppled monarchs across seven separate lands within the greater Mushroom World. Mario and Luigi are initially tasked with restoring order to these kingdoms, but in a twist, upon restoring the seventh ruler to power they receive a note from Bowser declaring that he has once again abducted Princess Toadstool while they were away.

The eight kingdoms—including Bowser's realm, Dark Land—to be traversed are each uniquely themed, from grasslands to desert and from watery depths to frozen tundra, lands teeming with mammoth foes, dizzying heights, and treacherous mazes of pipes. Each world has been greatly expanded to include additional standard-numbered levels, Mini-Fortresses, Hammer Brothers hazards, and even specialty levels such as the World 2 Pyramid, the World 5 Tower, the World 7 Piranha Plants, and the World 8 Tanks and Ships levels, just to name a few.

As with its predecessors, *Super Mario Bros. 3* affords the player the option to warp from one world to a selection of new worlds, this time by employing one or a pair of the three available Magic Whistles that can be obtained within the first two worlds. In a new development, there are also occasional forks within the overworld maps where one can choose the desired path forward. For instance, after completing the second level of World 1, one can choose to proceed to either the third level, the fourth level, or the Mini-Fortress.

At the end of each of Worlds 1–7 awaits a progeny of Bowser. Bearing names inspired by historic musical figures such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Lemmy Kilmister, Wendy O. Williams, and Iggy Pop, each Koopa Kid rides aloft on a unique and lethally designed airship and wields the power of a magic wand pilfered from the recently dethroned and transformed ruler of their respective conquered land. At World 8's end, Bowser looms in his malevolent fortress, which contains an array of death traps, including copious lava pits and statues featuring his likeness that are capable of firing lasers.

While the odds may appear to be heavily stacked against Mario and Luigi, *Super Mario Bros. 3* does offer several noteworthy upgrades to their arsenal. In addition to established power-ups such as the Super Mushroom, Fire Flower, and Starman, the game introduces the Tanooki Suit, the Frog Suit, the Hammer Suit, and the Magic Wing (also known as the "P-Wing"), along with the aforementioned Raccoon power-up.

The Tanooki Suit possesses the same flight and tail-whipping abilities as the Raccoon power-up but has the added ability to provide temporary invulnerability via its statue transformation. The Frog Suit enhances jumping distance on land and increases agility and maneuverability while traversing the underwater stages. The Hammer Suit endows the hammer-hurling power of a Hammer Brother while also providing protection from fireball projectiles when in the crouched position. The Magic Wing grants the Raccoon power-up, but with perpetual top speed enabled to allow for constant flight within a given level. Items can be obtained by conquering wandering hazards such as Hammer Brothers, visiting Toad in one of his many abodes peppered throughout the game, matching two item cards within the N-Mark Spade Panel minigame, and defeating each of the Koopa Kids in Worlds 1–6.

To accommodate and further complement this influx of new power-ups, *Super Mario Bros. 3* introduces an inventory system where items can be stored and then enabled prior to entering a selected level. Opportunities to earn extra lives are plentiful. In particular, there are two scenarios under which the chance to gain lives in bunches exists, either by obtaining a trio of cards displaying the same object upon completing three consecutive levels, or by matching all three parts of the same image within the horizontal slot machine–style Spade Panel minigame. In either situation, a matched set featuring the mushroom

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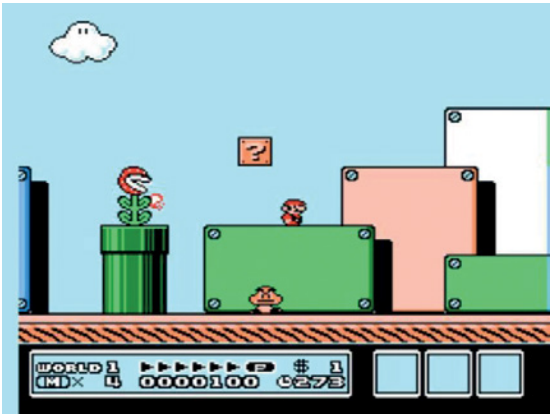

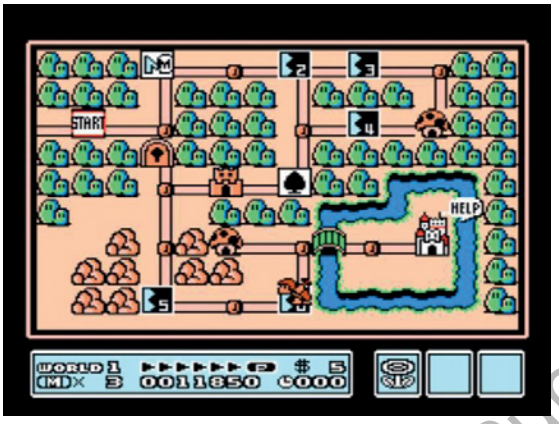

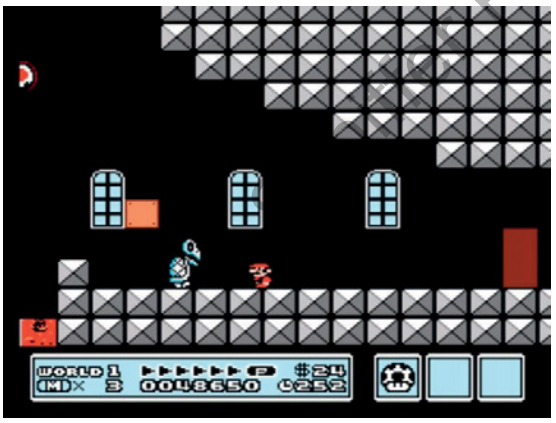

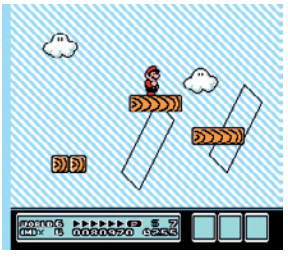

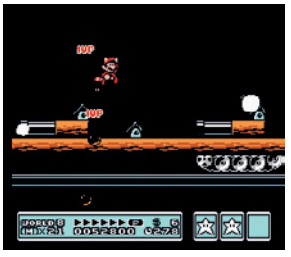

yields two extra lives, while the flower grants three extra lives and the star awards five extra lives. Moreover, the introduction of the Switch Block allows for the further accumulation of surplus lives by briefly converting standard brick-style blocks into coins that can be rapidly amassed when clustered, and result in a bonus life each time 100 are collected.

In an interview with nintendo.com, the codirector of the game, Takashi Tezuka, revealed that the game "wouldn't come together well" at first and that development "dragged on" because of a change in the game's visual perspective.

"At first we were making it with a bird's-eye view rather than a side view," he said. "But we couldn't do it well."

Shigeru Miyamoto, the game's other director, added, "[Tezuka] said he wanted to look from a little above. But in *Super Mario Bros.* it is important whether Mario's feet hit the ground or not, even barely. With a diagonal view from slightly overhead you lost your sense of distance to the ground. So I told him that development would be difficult."

Tezuka spoke about the original idea for *Super Mario Bros. 3* as well:

> We made *Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels* [the Japanese sequel to *Super Mario Bros.*] by changing the original game's difficulty and stage design, but we couldn't do that again, so I wanted to change everything, including its general appearance. . . . I wanted to put in a new action where players could press a button to have Mario spin around and knock enemies out of the way with his tail . . . we wanted to put in a lot of stuff.

Super Mario Bros. 3, which took more than 20 programmers around two and a half years to create, was very well received at launch. In his April 1990 review in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, Steve Harris glowingly asserted, "*Super Mario Bros. 3* is the largest, most detailed, graphically superb, audio enhanced, three-meg masterpiece loaded with perfect power-ups and extraordinary execution, most fun-to-play game I've seen on the Nintendo."

Super Mario Bros. 3 has been rereleased across multiple Nintendo platforms, including the Super Nintendo as part of the *Super Mario All-Stars* compilation, the Game Boy Advance via the Super Mario Advance series, and as a stand-alone downloadable title starting with the Nintendo Wii.

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Across the span of more than three decades, appreciation for the game has only continued to grow. A November 2007 review by the staff of Nintendo Life (nintendolife.com) summed up the timeless appeal of *Super Mario Bros. 3* perfectly: "*SMB3* cannot come any more highly recommended; it is widely regarded, by many, as the best game on the NES. Some would even say it rivals the magnificent *Super Mario World* on the SNES, though the jury is out on that one. You owe it to yourself to try both out and decide for yourself. You won't be sorry!"

With *Super Mario Bros. 3*, Nintendo cemented the legacy of the franchise. It retained the best aspects of its forebearers from a gameplay mechanics standpoint and introduced new concepts and features that ultimately became fixtures in subsequent titles. The developers deftly navigated the waters of expanding the gameplay while maintaining the core spirit of *Super Mario Bros.* to which we had all become accustomed.

FUN FACT:

When facing the might of Bowser's Navy in the World 8 Battleships stage, one can circumvent the perils found on the decks of the second and third ships by swimming underneath both vessels.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Super Mario Bros. 3 is a likely contender to appear on the most all-time top 100 video games lists, so it is a veritable slam dunk for this "top 100 of the decade" compilation tome. It was easily one of the most anticipated releases of its time, fueled in part by its appearance in the 1989 movie The Wizard. However, unlike many heavily hyped titles, Super Mario Bros. 3 delivered on the experience it promised, and it remains a treasured title among competitive and casual retro gaming enthusiasts of all ages to this day.

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary

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CHAPTER 77

SUPER MARIO KART

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: GO KART RACING
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

Similar to when one hears a favorite song, video games frequently evoke a particular time and place. As such, my affinity for a game often has as much to do with related memories as it does with the actual quality of the gameplay. Few titles embody this for me as much as *Super Mario Kart*. Over the course of several visits with my grandparents in the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, area throughout the early to mid-'90s, I had the good fortune of meeting and getting to know a branch of my family that was previously inaccessible, since my aunt, uncle, and a small army of cousins moved from Oklahoma to a house just down the hill from my grandparents' home. Being in my early teenage years at the time, introductions were typically awkward. However, I came into our initial meeting equipped with the best possible icebreaker, my Super Nintendo. A rapport quickly formed, especially between my eldest cousin, Joe, and me, since we were just a year apart in age.

Mortal Kombat was our gateway title for head-to-head gaming, but as a frequent change of pace from virtually disemboweling each other we played *Super Mario Kart*. At first we dabbled in the Mario Kart GP mode but quickly shifted over to the Battle Mode. We burned through countless hours, laughing as we hunted each other in the arena environments. When we finally grew weary of shelling each other, we transitioned to the Time Trial mode. We played all the tracks, but our favorite and most-contended top times were on the Ghost Valley trio of tracks. Fueled by Pepsi and pizza, we would trade the top times back and forth, sometimes not realizing that daybreak had already come and gone by the time we wrapped for the night. Those *Super Mario Kart* all-nighters with Joe were highlights of my teenage years, and they remain some of the most memorable and enjoyable gaming sessions that I have had to this day.

As mentioned, *Super Mario Kart* contains a variety of play modes. Mario Kart GP allows the player to join an eight-kart field to contend for a cup championship. Over the span of a quintet of five-lap races, points are earned on the basis of one's placement at the conclusion of each race. Failure to place in the top four of any individual race will require the use of one of a limited number of retries. After each completed race (and overall), one's position in the cup standings is determined by the sum of the points earned juxtaposed against the tallies of the other AI competitors. There are three cups available to start—the Mushroom Cup, the Flower Cup, and the Star Cup—positioned in order of increasing track complexity. The speed of the kart itself and the applicable AI tenacity level are denoted by the engine size, with 50cc and 100cc immediately available. Once one takes the top spot in all three cups at the 100cc level, the fourth and final circuit opens up, the Special Cup. Upon adding a first-place finish in the 100cc Special Cup to one's trophy case, the final engine size option unlocks, 150cc.

The eight available characters are an eclectic selection, from mainstays such as Mario and Luigi, to a throwback in Donkey Kong Jr., to a somewhat perplexing choice in the lowly Koopa Troopa. Beyond the obvious difference in sprite appearance, each character also comes with distinct advantages and disadvantages with respect to their speed, agility, and durability.

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While character selection is important, the great equalizers in Mario Kart GP are the power-up items provided by the Question Blocks appearing on each track. Upon contact with a Question Block, a series of potential items rapidly cycle through a box at the top of the screen. The item shuffle will stop either when initiated by the player or when its allotted cycle time expires. Once it does, the displayed item can be utilized to the player's advantage at will. The available items offer widely varied benefits, from the Mushroom's blast of acceleration, to the Red Shell's rival-seeking prowess, to the Lightning Bolt's ability to shrink the opposition's advantage quite literally by making the rest of the racers temporarily fun-sized and considerably slower as a result. The AI-controlled opponents also have items of their own, specific to each character, that can level the playing field.

The Time Trial mode does away with the GP mode's multikart madness and weapons-fueled mayhem and instead pits the player against oneself: five laps of pure racing precision to set or break the top marks for an individual lap or the full course (or both). In an interesting twist, if the same course is played repeatedly without change, one can race against the specter of the best performance so far within that same gaming session.

On the multiplayer options front, a second player can participate in the Mario Kart GP mode. Additionally, there are two other two-player exclusive modes. The Match Race mode pits both players directly against each other in individual course races without the interference of six other AI-controlled characters. The final, and endlessly entertaining, two-player option is the Battle Mode. Enclosed within one of the four available Battle Courses, players begin in opposing positions with three balloons orbiting each of their karts. As they traverse the corridors of their chosen arena, they encounter Question Blocks containing the standard array of items (minus the Coin and Lightning Bolt) found in the Mario Kart GP Mode. These items function in the same way, but this time the objective is to use them to eliminate the opposing player's balloons while simultaneously guarding one's own. The first player to pop all three of the other's balloons wins the match. The addition of the Ghost (Boo) item to the two-player exclusive modes provides an interesting twist, since it enables a player to steal the other's current item while also attaining temporary invisibility. As a result the tables can turn very quickly, with hilarity often ensuing.

The 20 individual race courses provide a healthy blend of high-speed hijinks and perpetual peril that keeps one's adrenaline level at its peak. With multiple variations within revolving themed courses such as Donut Plains 1–3, Vanilla Lake 1–2, and Bowser Castle 1–3, one becomes accustomed with how each track style plays, while still facing the challenges of the escalating design complexity and the increasingly hazardous nature of the successive courses. Above all courses, the most famous is Rainbow Road. While a mesmerizing sight, it is the most lethal challenge one faces in *Super Mario Kart*. With zero rails and a bevy of sharp turns, simply staying on the course can be a feat in and of itself. Throw in the recurring threat of being crushed by multiple sets of falling-stone Thwomps starting in the second lap and you have the ideal formula for nightmare fuel. Undoubtedly Rainbow Road earns its spot as the final course to conquer in the toughest of all circuits, the Special Cup.

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FUN FACT:

Super Mario Kart evolved from plans for a completely different multiplayer racing game that were derailed due to a hardware limitation. In a 2017 interview conducted by Akinori Sao for Nintendo (nintendo.com) to promote the rerelease of Super Mario Kart on the SNES Classic Edition, Super Mario Kart directors Tadashi Sugiyama and Hideki Konno recounted the sequence of events that ultimately shaped the game's development:

Sao: Super Mario Kart came out within two years of the release of Super Famicom, so I was surprised to hear that development only took one year. And it started as a two-player version of F-Zero!
Konno: Yep. If the Super NES hardware had allowed for showing tracks with long straight lines in a split screen we may have made F-Zero 2.
Sao: Then Super Mario Kart would never have been born!
Konno: That's right. We could only make twisting tracks, and we adopted karts to make that fun, and we found that something was lacking with just eight karts racing around and around, so we tried putting in oil cans and were like, "Whoa! It slipped!" . . . And that was how it came about!
Sao: And the oil became banana peels, and you brought it all together in a year.
Konno: That's right.
Sao: And you went to a recreational resort and even smashed up a remote control kart! [laughs]
Konno: Uh-huh! [laughs]
Sao: After all that, Super Mario Kart became the top selling game in Japan for Super Famicom. And it's amazing how it became a series with many installments.
Sugiyama: In that respect it was a fortuitous project. At first we didn't at all intend to head in the direction it eventually took, but because of various constraints it went that way out of necessity—which is a bit miraculous.
Konno: What's more, Miyamoto didn't upend the tea table on us!
Sugiyama: That's a miracle, too! [laughs]
Sao: Miyamoto-san was satisfied with the course of development?
Sugiyama: I believe so. [laughs]

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Three decades have passed since this inaugural release of the Mario Kart series, and gamers ranging from casual to hard core adore the franchise with a passion that only seems to grow with each successive release. Super Mario Kart started it all, and it is still super entertaining!

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary

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CHAPTER 78

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: SQUARESOFT
1 Player
1996

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The year 1996 was an exciting time for popular culture. *Independence Day* and *Twister* dominated at the box office, while George R. R. Martin's landmark *Game of Thrones* novel series got underway. Comic book fans went gaga over *Kingdom Come* by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, while music junkies listened to everything from Metallica to Mariah Carey to Alanis Morissette. Despite Kurt Cobain's death in 1994, grunge remained popular, with bands such as Pearl Jam and Soundgarden still charting. And yeah, the Spice Girls were a thing.

More importantly, at least for the purposes of this book, the mighty Nintendo 64 came to North America on September 29, launching with *Pilotwings 64* and *Super Mario 64*. The PlayStation had hit our shores the previous year, and gamers were stoked for the next generation of gaming, with 3-D images adorning the pages of industry magazines such as *GamePro* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*.

Despite the inevitable transition from 2-D to 3-D with the more powerful systems, the 16-bit era wasn't quite done. The Super Nintendo was on its last legs (the last first-party title for the console hit stores in 1997), but fans of the console got a terrific present on May 13, 1996, with the release of *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars*, a collaboration between Nintendo and Square Soft. Role-playing games weren't as commercially successful in the US as they were in Japan, but gamers were intrigued by the notion of an RPG starring everyone's favorite Italian plumber. In fact, Nintendo published the game in part to try to help make RPGs more popular in North America.

Mario fans expressed curiosity over the first images of the game. It is an isometric (three-quarter-view perspective) action RPG that was created using the same type of prerendered graphics that *Donkey Kong Country* had two years prior. The effect created a 3-D environment and character set that far surpassed previous works by Square Soft.

The story line for the game follows Mario as the Princess is captured yet again by King Koopa, a.k.a. Bowser. During the conflict, Bowser's castle shakes as a new villain—a robotic blacksmith from another world called Smithy—expels Mario and Bowser, seizes control of the castle, and disrupts the Mushroom Kingdom. Mario must collect seven stars to repair Star Road and return to the castle to defeat Smithy and his gang. While the princess still needs rescuing, the plot adds to the Mario mythos by introducing new tagalong characters such as Mallow the Magical Cloud, who thinks he is a tadpole, and Geno, a marionette possessed by a star spirit.

Previous Mario games had basic story lines that were light on plot, consisting of little more than the Princess getting captured and Toad reminding us that she is in another castle. *Super Mario RPG* fleshed out many of the personalities we Mario fans had grown to love. Even Bowser became a sympathetic character

with a rather quirky personality. Most every character interaction will put a smile on your face. From Bowser "reluctantly" teaming up with Mario to Mallow's identity issues, the characters ooze with charm.

The game consists of three main styles of play. The most obvious is turn-based battle, which was the standard for RPGs of the era. Exclusive to this game is the use of timed hits that will double the power of your attacks or increase your defense. The bulk of the game is spent talking and traversing the small area maps that take you from location to location. This is more linear than most games of this genre but really helped the feel of going from level to level as you would in a traditional Mario title.

Within these areas you will interact with nonplayable characters, encounter bosses, use the inns, and hit up merchants. Much like *Super Mario Bros 3* and *Super Mario World*, the game is broken up into different themed areas, the first being traditional Mushroom Kingdom. There are both classic-styled areas as well as new areas never seen in a Mario game before. The underground levels mirror the tricky nature of their classic 2-D counterparts, where you use the correct warp pipes in the proper patterns to progress. The castles have a great new yet classic feel to them. While darker than their 2-D counterparts, they have a similar aesthetic, making them feel like a true isometric version of the traditional 2-D. Then there are new locations such as the Tadpole Pond, where Mallow's family resides.

The third area of *Super Mario RPG* is unusual. In a traditional RPG, you typically walk across a long map to go back to a previously visited location. Instead there is a map screen similar to *Final Fantasy Mystic Quest* and *Super Mario Bros 3*. Once you have traversed through sections of the game, you can easily go back to the map and select your desired past location instead of walking through the same dungeons over and over. This cuts out a huge part of the grinding that this genre thrived on at the time. You can go back into beaten dungeons to look for items or level up your party, but this is rarely needed, since the game provides plenty of opportunity to level up as you go.

My brother received his copy of *Super Mario RPG* for Christmas the year it came out, and it was a staple around our house that each of us fought to play. The following summer, it was my salvation the week after I got my wisdom teeth out, because I was stuck in bed. Sadly, I never got an actual cartridge of my own, but I would borrow my brother's copy. Now I often go back to the game on my Wii U thanks to the game's release on the virtual shop in 2016.

While *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* does have many of the trappings of a typical role-playing game, the developers endeavored to give it the feel of a proper Mario experience.

In a 1995 interview with *Family Computer Magazine*, the game's director, Chihiro Fujioka, said, "I think the essence of Mario lies in his movement. The way he jumps, jumping on enemies to destroy them, transforming with mushrooms, running like mad after you get invincibility from a star . . . in other words, how the controls feel. Mario games are very tactile—you're always pressing buttons."

Fujioka continued: "However, it wouldn't make any sense to just translate these things directly. For example, in most RPGs mechanics like jumping and dashing have just been convenient ways to move your character around a map/dungeon. But in a Mario game, dashing and jumping carries with it a risk. . . . We really wanted to make an RPG where the player is always engaged with the controls."

Super Mario RPG was highly praised when it was new in stores, as evidenced by this review in the May 1996 issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*:

> I can honestly say that I did not plan on seeing a new Mario game until the Nintendo 64 was unveiled. The characters seem too childish for older gamers, but the long adventure itself, that involves actual gameplay and good storyline, will keep many gamers interested. The graphics of *Mario RPG* are typical of Nintendo, using clean and colorful graphics along with nice animation. The combat engine is similar to many other RPGs and is easy to use. Nintendo put the Super NES sound processor to work in *Mario RPG*, providing the gamer with great sound effects and music. RPG fans will have hours of fun and enjoyment with *Mario RPG*.

And the game holds up well today. In November 2020, a reviewer for the Gaming Hoard (thegamehoard.com) wrote, "Amazing music, delightful moments, and a battle system that keeps the player actively involved . . . it gets a lot of mileage out of mixing together moments of overworld platforming, turn based battles, and minigame diversions. The story and combat are enjoyable . . . an excellent first attempt at the genre for Mario, with an appealing and colorful game world coupled with an interesting sense of humor."

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FUN FACT:

Super Mario RPG includes numerous references to characters from other Nintendo franchises, such as Link and Samus. You can also find models of the Arwing from Star Fox, as well as Captain Falcon and Samurai Goroh's ships from F-Zero. This type of game referencing presaged that of the Super Smash Bros. series.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Cute, user friendly, and easy to complete, Super Mario RPG introduced a more mainstream audience to the world of role-playing games. More importantly, it's a ton of fun to play.

—Zoe Howard, Retro Gamer Girls cocreator, author of November's End and The Hunters Realm

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CHAPTER 79

SUPER MARIO WORLD

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (ALTERNATING)
1991

"Suddenly the sky is a little clearer. The water is a little bluer. The road's a little bumpier. The jumps are harder, the levels deeper, the characters smarter, the sound is hotter, the graphics cooler, the secrets darker, the danger's fiercer, the challenge a whole lot tougher, and suddenly the world is a more exciting place to be."

Those words still fill me with a sense of wonder and joy that's rarely been matched in my life. They were the narration for the TV commercial that was for many in the US their first look at *Super Mario World*, and a window into the potential of the brand-new Super Nintendo Entertainment System. To people of a certain age it was HUGE.

The Mario franchise started out strong in 1981 by taking over arcades with *Donkey Kong* (where Mario was first known as Jumpman), and in the 10 years that followed, it not only maintained its popularity but grew it exponentially. Mario helped Nintendo take over the home video game market in North America. He had multiple toy lines and an animated series and adorned everything from napkins to blankets to garbage cans to toys, and everything in between.

This popularity reached a fever pitch with the release of *Super Mario Bros. 3*. Saying that game was a massive success would be underselling it to a criminal degree. The hype surrounding it was unlike anything most people had ever seen in gaming at the time, with magazine covers and local news broadcasts alike talking about the Mario Mania that had swept the globe. There was even a feature film—*The Wizard*—ultimately dedicated to spreading the word about *Super Mario Bros. 3*. But none of that would have mattered much if the game itself didn't deliver, and boy did it ever. *Mario 3* was in many ways the ultimate NES game. So how do you follow up a success like that?

A complete reinvention would have been too much of a risk, but a straight retread wouldn't have been bold enough. It had to impress without alienating, which can be a difficult thing to do. In true Nintendo fashion, they managed to pull it off by taking what worked about the franchise's previous iterations and polishing it all to a spotless shine, while evolving the formula in ways that would influence the series for decades to come.

All the basics were still there. Running and jumping felt as tight as they did in *Super Mario Bros. 3*. The ability to fly returned, but in place of a raccoon tail, Mario got a magic cape that allowed greatly expanded aerial-exploration possibilities to those who could master the skill. The overworld map returned, but instead of traveling to separate kingdoms, Mario explored gigantic interconnected areas that gave the world a much more tangible feel.

The real game-changers, though, came in the power-up system and the basic level structure. In *Mario 3*, you could collect power-ups to use on the map screen at any time. In *Super Mario World* that system was replaced by a box that could store a single item at the top of the screen that was accessible at any time during actual stages. If you get a Fire Flower while you already have the cape, a feather would move to your item box while Mario gained the ability to throw fireballs. If you took a hit, that item would then fall from the item box into the playfield, or you could press the select button to use it at any time.

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On the topic of power-ups, *Super Mario Bros. 3* introduced a series of suits that Mario could wear, giving him special abilities. These transformations weren't present in *Super Mario World*. Instead, they were replaced by an actual animal that you could ride in the form of the lovable Yoshi. This green dinosaur not only took off in popularity enough to eventually spawn his own subfranchise, but he intrinsically changed the way Super Mario platformers played. From effectively giving players a double jump, to being able to walk on surfaces that would instantly kill Mario on his own, Yoshi was more versatile than all of the *Mario 3* suits combined.

In an interview published on nintendo.com, *Super Mario World* director Takashi Tezuka spoke about the inspiration for Yoshi.

> Shigeru Miyamoto said he wanted Mario to ride a horse. I think he likes horses [laughs]. When we were making *Super Mario Bros. 3*, he had drawn a picture of Mario on a horse and hung it on a wall near where he used to sit. I would look at that and think, "I think he wants Mario to ride something." When we started making *Super Mario World* we were working with the concept of a dinosaur land, so I had [character designer Shigefumi] Hino do art for a kind of reptile. . . . It felt out of place to have a reptile suddenly appear in Mario's world, so we went back and talked about how maybe it shouldn't be like a crocodile.

Hino added, "Tezuka had done a rough sketch and it was cute and pretty good, so I polished up Yoshi into its current form based on that."

Finally, we come to the most amazing change of all, the level structure. The idea was still to reach the goalpost at the end of each stage, but this time around 24 of the 72 stages in the game also contained secret exits that would lead to new levels, some with secret exits of their own. The game may have contained fewer unique levels overall than its progenitor, but it also encouraged repeat play and exploration through impeccable level design and airtight gameplay. Finding all 96 exits would take you on entire chains of levels, re-forming the map terrain as you played. Running straight ahead and finishing the game in the style of previous entries was still a blast, but the journey of discovering all *Super Mario World* had to offer was nothing short of a revelation, and easily one of the most memorable gaming experiences of its day.

Those features would have been enough to make *Mario World* special, but there was so much more. There was the introduction of the Koopa Clown car, the memorable soundtrack, the spin jump, the secret Star Road having its own secret Special World hidden within, secrets that actually alter the look of the entire map, hilarious "cutscenes" between castles, Switch Palaces, and series mainstays such as Wigglers. Even the game's official strategy guide was something special, with the first half dedicated to detailing the history of the Mario franchise.

The thing was, for as impressive as this all sounds, at the time *Super Mario World* didn't quite live up to *Super Mario Bros. 3*'s legacy. At first glance it wasn't the incredible visual upgrade some were expecting, especially next to other SNES launch titles such as *F-Zero* and *Pilotwings*. And of course there was the competition.

Sega released their "Mario killer" *Sonic the Hedgehog* almost two months before *Super Mario World* and the SNES launched in the US, effectively initiating the Console Wars. Sonic was fast and had way more personality as a character, and his game was a visual stunner. Putting the two side by side always made *Sonic* look like the clear winner, but time has told a very different story. *Sonic the Hedgehog* is still a beloved classic, but over the years *Super Mario World* has been elevated to the status of video game royalty, proving to be infinitely replayable in ways *Sonic* never quite achieved. It made up for its lack of flash with an unbelievable amount of substance and has earned its place as one of the greats.

The game was retooled for the Super NES a few years later in the *Super Mario All-Stars + World* pack-in game, got an enhanced port on the Game Boy Advance, and has been made readily available on pretty much every console Nintendo has released since the Wii, but no matter where you play it, one thing remains true: Now You're Playing with Power—Super Power!

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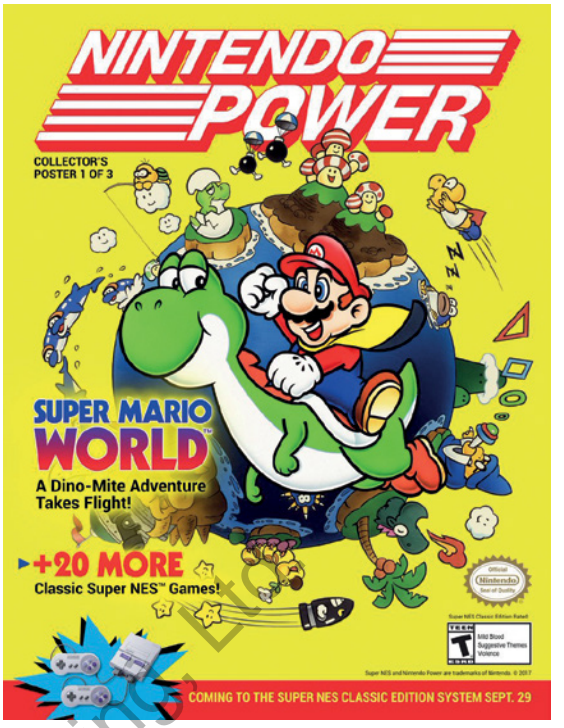
FUN FACT:

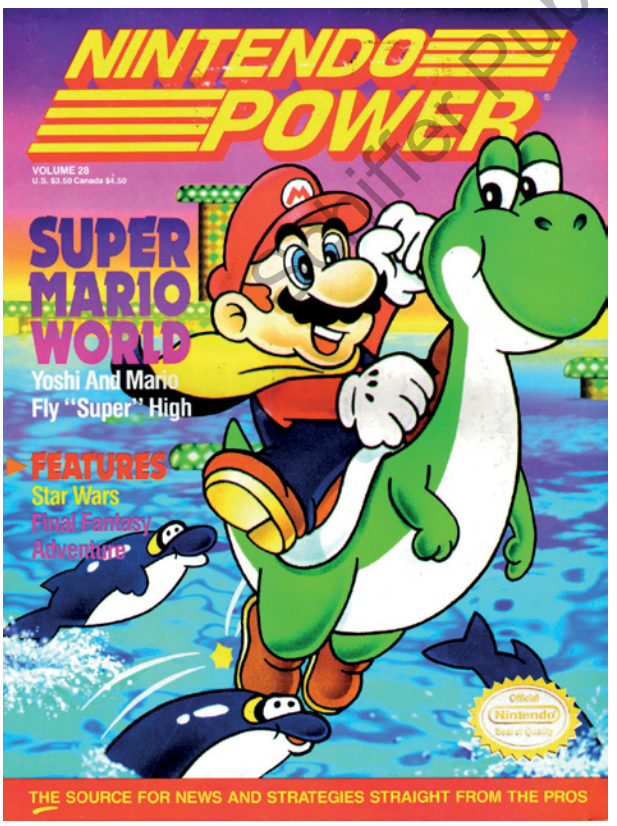
If you make it to the Special World area, just stand still on the map for a while. After about two minutes the music will change into a funky rendition of the Super Mario Bros. theme. When Super Mario Bros. was eventually remade in Super Mario All-Stars, the Overworld theme there also used a similar instrumentation.

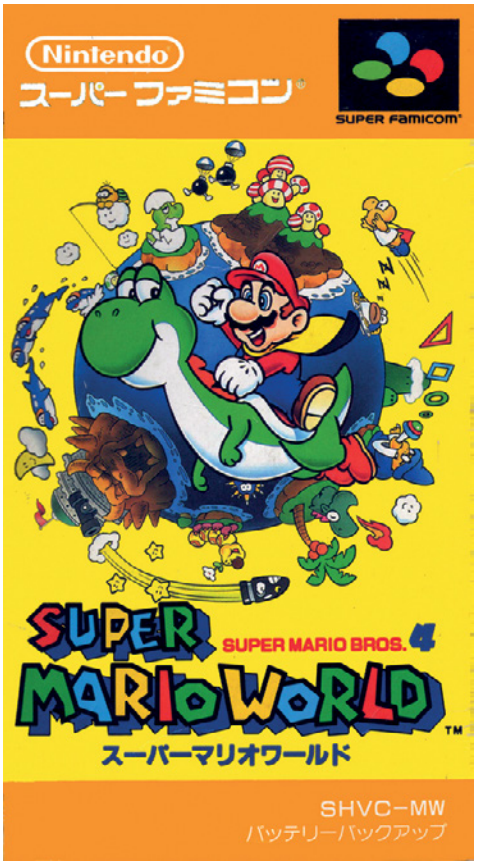
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Super Mario World isn't just a great game for newcomers, it carries an incredible nostalgic weight behind it for anyone who lived during that era. Seeing Mario soar through the colorful sky with a literal superhero cape after watching him struggle to climb ladders in Donkey Kong was an incredible sight to behold. It's one of the finest examples of its genre, and easily one of the best console launch titles in all of gaming history.

—Kris Randazzo, staff writer at Nintendo Force Magazine and Stone Age Gamer







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CHAPTER 80

SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1 PLAYER
1995

Schiffer Publishing, Ltd.

Yoshi's Island stands alone on the Super Nintendo as a courageous, innovative, and original adventure title.

Released as *Super Mario World 2*, the game positions itself as a prequel of sorts to the famous SNES launch title *Super Mario World*. *Yoshi's Island*, however, offers players significant differences from the earlier title in the series, including innovative gameplay mechanics and a memorable visual style.

Yoshi's Island opens with a colorful story sequence that introduces the player to babies Mario and Luigi, along with a whole tribe of Yoshies. The story begins with the villain Kamek (who happens to be a Magikoopa) colliding with a flying stork who carries the famous plumber babies. While Kamek is successful in snatching brother Luigi, Mario falls and is thankfully caught by Yoshi. Thus begins the player's quest; control Yoshi as the main character, defeat Kamek, and reunite the brothers to save the day.

Yoshi's Island presents as a side-scrolling platformer like many other Mario games. Players must run and jump as they move from the start of the level to the end goal, collecting coins and defeating enemies along the way. Levels are arranged into thematic worlds, with each having minibosses and major bosses to defeat. In total, there are 48 levels spread across six worlds. Each of these worlds features a miniboss and a major boss the player must defeat. Where *Yoshi's Island* innovates is in two ways it extends those mechanics.

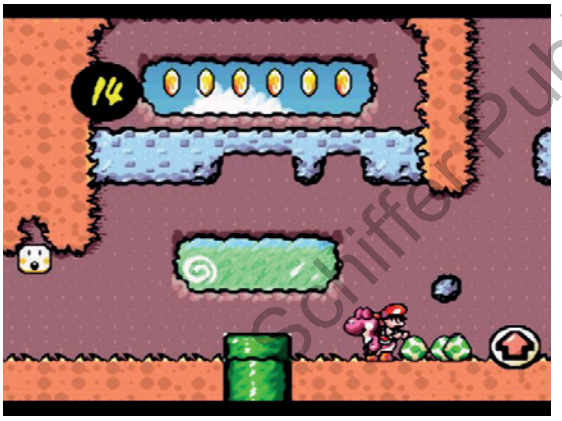
As Yoshi, players have a higher goal than simply getting to the end unharmed—they must do so while protecting baby Mario! If the player is hit, Mario will be knocked from Yoshi's back, doomed to wander the stage as a floating bubble until released. Players must pop the bubble by touching it to return Mario to Yoshi's back safely. Fail to do so before the timer runs out, and the player will lose a life. This goal proved tough for players, not only because of gameplay challenges but also due to the infamous "crybaby Mario" sound effect that played while Mario was at risk. This sound effect even earned a "Power Award" from *Nintendo Power* magazine (May 1996) for "Most Annoying Feature."

Despite that perhaps unwanted notoriety, the game also earned the award for "Most Innovative Game" from the same issue. Perhaps the more innovative mechanic is the introduction of eggs that players can rocket toward enemies, knocking them senseless. Yoshi can "hold" a small collection of these eggs like ammunition to use throughout a level. These eggs happily bounce behind Yoshi until a button is pressed to activate a moving crosshair. In a "Ready! Aim! Fire!" fashion, players can press another button to send the egg flying. This mechanic proves versatile, since players can use eggs for many purposes, including neutralizing enemies, triggering hidden surprises, collecting hard-to-reach coins, and yes, popping the bubble containing a crybaby Mario from a distance.

Innovation is present in the creative style of the game as well. Visually, *Yoshi's Island* features an unmistakably organic look. Led by visual artist Hisashi Nogami, the style required drawings to be created by

hand, which were scanned into a computer before approximating the pixel versions seen in-game (Chris Kohler, "How Yoshi's Island Got Its Beautiful, Hand-Drawn Look," 2018, kotaku.com).

This style received some challenge during development, however, since the popularity of 3-D-modeled graphics found in *Donkey Kong Country* led many to push for a similar treatment of *Yoshi's Island*.



This 3-D can be seen in the opening cinematic that introduces the story, while the core game graphics receive a striking coloring style to ensure its identity as something fresh and new.

The same honors of innovation and creativity can be placed on the game's sound design. Composer Koji Kondo was no stranger to crafting music for Nintendo titles; among his most famous releases are the atmospheric Legend of Zelda series, as well as previous Mario titles. *Yoshi's Island* would pull inspirations from these releases, as well as introduce nursery-like melodies that present the opening cinematic.

Technically speaking, the development team made significant advancements for a Super Nintendo title. Many of the game's boss battles were designed to use the SuperFX chip, which delivered advanced graphics in games such as *Star Fox*, among others. However, in the course of development, this chip became unsupported and the SuperFX2 chip was used instead. This allowed for massive character sprites, such as Burt the Bashful, who guards the first castle in Worlds 1–4. Other examples of the SuperFX2 in action include dynamic scaling and rotation, as well as warping effects, such as the psychedelic undulating effect when Yoshi touches floating fungi.

These achievements would earn *Yoshi's Island* numerous accolades from gaming press of the time, including Matt Taylor of *Diehard GameFan*, who wrote that *Yoshi's Island* could be "possibly the best platform game of all time." Writers for *Nintendo Power* agreed, adding that the title was "one of the biggest, most beautiful games ever made." Over time, numerous other publications showered the game with praise, and in a ranked list of 125 titles, *Yoshi's Island* sits among other legendary games at #15 in IGN's 2014 feature, "The Top 125 Nintendo Games of All Time."

While some earlier releases such as *Yoshi* and *Yoshi's Cookie* were led by the colorful dinosaur, the success of *Yoshi's Island* would solidify Yoshi as a leading character of robust adventure titles. *Yoshi's Story* on the Nintendo 64 would follow, unfortunately suffering from fan backlash regarding the 3-D art style resisted in the Super Nintendo release, as well as tedious gameplay mechanics. Yoshi received several minor releases following *Yoshi's Story* before returning in a direct sequel for the Nintendo DS in 2005 titled *Yoshi's Island DS*.

Yoshi's Island stands alone on the Super Nintendo as an awesome game that solidified its lead character as one of the most-endearing and fun-to-play protagonists on this platform and beyond.

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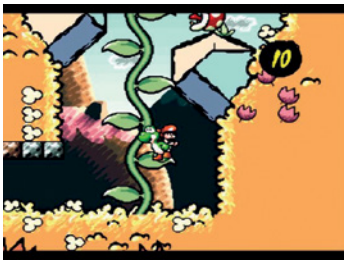
FUN FACT:

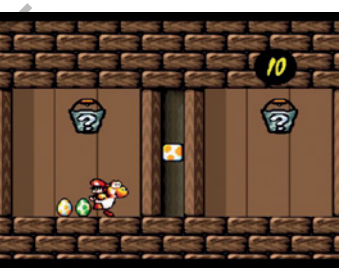
Yoshi's Island's development team, Nintendo EAD, also codeveloped Star Fox, which offered exposure to the SuperFX and SuperFX2 chips that supported many of the game's memorable boss fights.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Along with being cute, colorful, expansive, and innovative, Yoshi's Island is just plain fun.

—Matt Raithel, studio director, Graphite Lab; professor of practice of game design, Maryville University





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CHAPTER 81

SUPER METROID

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: PLATFORM SHOOTER / ADVENTURE
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO
R&D1 / INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
1 PLAYER
1994

In researching this piece on *Super Metroid*, I read countless print and online reviews that all heaped universal praise upon the classic game. Most reviewers lauded the standard litany of qualitative aspects that inhabit every review. Some articles highlighted *Super Metroid*'s technical presentation. Some focused more on the game's deep and innovative play style. Others delved into the aspects that made the game enjoyable and fulfilling.

But there's one commonality that nearly every article mentioned, and only those who have played the game will understand: *Super Metroid* is all about mood. With today's technology, it's commonplace for games to achieve a lifelike quality of nearly scary proportions. Stepping inside a game and achieving an effortless immersion has never been easier. Our senses are lured and convinced by high-definition graphics, Dolby surround sound, and all the newfangled bells and whistles one could dream. But in 1994 this wasn't easily achieved. In the 16-bit era, designers and writers began to push games in new and exciting directions to evoke more-definitive emotional and visceral experiences. In the case of *Super Metroid*, the lasting impression conjures feelings of dark, cold abandonment on a foreboding planet.

Super Metroid finds our hero bounty hunter, Samus Aran, once again on the hunt to recover a potentially threatening biological sample that was safely quarantined until space pirates abducted it from a space station laboratory. Much like in the original *Metroid* (1987) for the Nintendo Entertainment System, Samus finds herself returning to the vast subterranean labyrinth of planet Zebes, once again confronting any and all obstacles in her path in hopes of recovering the abducted Metroid before it can be further weaponized.

Super Metroid is outstanding from the onset. Composed by Kenji Yamamoto and Minako Hamano, the ominous musical score grabs you and sets the tone for things to come. *Super Metroid* revives the familiar tunes from *Metroid* but kicks them up a notch with varied tempos, deeper melodies, and generally fuller sounds.

Graphically there is no 16-bit equal. *Super Metroid* is the most beautiful 16-bit game I've ever seen. Colors are crisp, textures are rich, animations are deliberate and detailed, and the overall composition is picturesque like no other. Compared to its 8-bit predecessor, *Super Metroid*'s level design, object textures, character appearances, and overall layout seem even more influenced by the works of Swiss artist H. R. Giger and the *Alien* movie franchise.

The game achieves a genuinely nightmarish, surreal feel at every turn. Stylistically and thematically this serves as a stark contradiction to other Nintendo intellectual properties such as *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *The Legend of Zelda* (1987), *Kid Icarus* (1987), and *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* (1987), all of which generally leveraged on relatively nonthreatening, cartoonish, colorful, and overall happier motifs. *Super Metroid*, on the other hand, takes a mature and often-somber tone. The danger seems real. The odds are very much against you. There's no one around to aid you. The game begins with a title screen with the bodies of dead scientists strewn about the floor, and a hostile organism attempting to break free of its cage! Truly this game holds nothing back.

As far as performance goes, *Super Metroid* is a finely tuned and surgically responsive masterpiece of the utmost quality. The tight control responsiveness and

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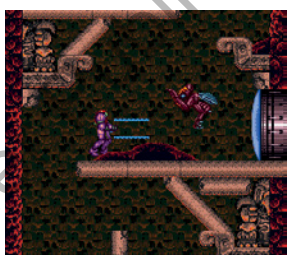
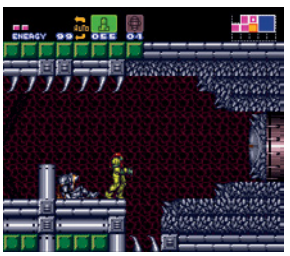
nonlinear environmental architecture serve to complement one another. The control scheme is organic, and Samus never feels clumsy. Areas that are seemingly inaccessible become available to the player once they've found the appropriate item or skill by which to boost Samus's exploring abilities. It sincerely feels as though Samus and Zebes were made for each other, challenging one another in turn.

Super Metroid is one of the most replayable and time-tested games ever created. In a quarter century it hasn't aged a day. If you fire up *Super Metroid* right now, I guarantee you that it will be just as fun as it was when it first launched. There's almost always something more to find or do. This is further compounded by the incorporation of differing endings based on overall playthrough time, which essentially gave birth to the practice of video game speed running whereby gamers vie for the shortest possible time by which to complete a game from beginning to end. And its world design and objective-based paradigm also gave rise to the subgenre known as "Metroidvania" (half *Metroid* and half *Castlevania*). If you play games such as *Guacamelee!* (DrinkBox Studios, 2013) or *Axiom Verge* (Thomas Happ Games, 2016) you'll notice the obvious influences.

Super Metroid launched as a 24-megabit cartridge—the largest SNES game of its time. This also led to the game being more expensive than most, costing a whopping $79.99 MSRP at launch! And despite its popularity and respectable commercial success, having shipped nearly 1.5 million copies worldwide, *Super Metroid* would be the only game of the *Metroid* franchise to grace the SNES. It was also the final *Metroid* game to be released during series producer Gunpei Yokoi's lifetime. Tragically, he passed away in 1997 in a traffic accident. Notably, Yokoi is also remembered as the creator of Nintendo's Game & Watch, the inventor of the cross-shaped D-pad, and the original designer of the Game Boy. Three years prior to *Super Metroid*'s release the Game Boy received its own Metroid game, *Metroid II: Return of Samus* (1991), ironically releasing in North America three months prior to Japan.





Despite *Super Metroid*'s receipt of nearly universal positive praise, Rus McLaughlin of IGN believed the Metroid series "still fell down on the timing, arriving too late in the SNES lifecycle to earn big sales." In fact, *Super Metroid* failed to outsell its two prior installments—NES' *Metroid* sold 2.73 million copies while *Metroid II: Return of Samus* moved 1.72 million units. Robinson also observed that *Super Metroid* was simply launched "at the wrong place, at the wrong time." It's suspected that sales in Japan were hampered in part by competing with other widely popular games such as *Donkey Kong Country* (1994), as well as against the debut of Sony's PlayStation and Sega's Saturn consoles.

Super Metroid would go on to become *Electronic Gaming Monthly*'s "Game of the Month" for May 1994. It later received the magazine's "Editors' Choice" award and was named "Best Action Game of 1994." In 2003, the magazine crowned it the best game of all time. *Super Metroid* cracked IGN's list of top 100 games of all time on multiple occasions, reaching as high as the #3 spot in 2003. In a readers' choice poll, IGN fans listed *Super Metroid* at #11 in their list of all-time favorites. Likewise, IGN readers ranked the game 11th in its list of top 99 games of all time in 2005. It would later climb to #4 in 2006. GamesRadar dubbed *Super Metroid* the best game ever released for the SNES. The accolades go on and on. One would be hard-pressed to uncover a list of all-time greatest games that doesn't include *Super Metroid* somewhere in its ranking.

Super Metroid is one of the great wonders of the video game world. It transcends the sum of its parts like few games can, not even its sequels. Many games can pay homage, but none have surpassed *Super Metroid*'s incomparable brilliance. For most Metroidvania-style games, just being passingly compared to *Super Metroid* would prove a sufficient honor.

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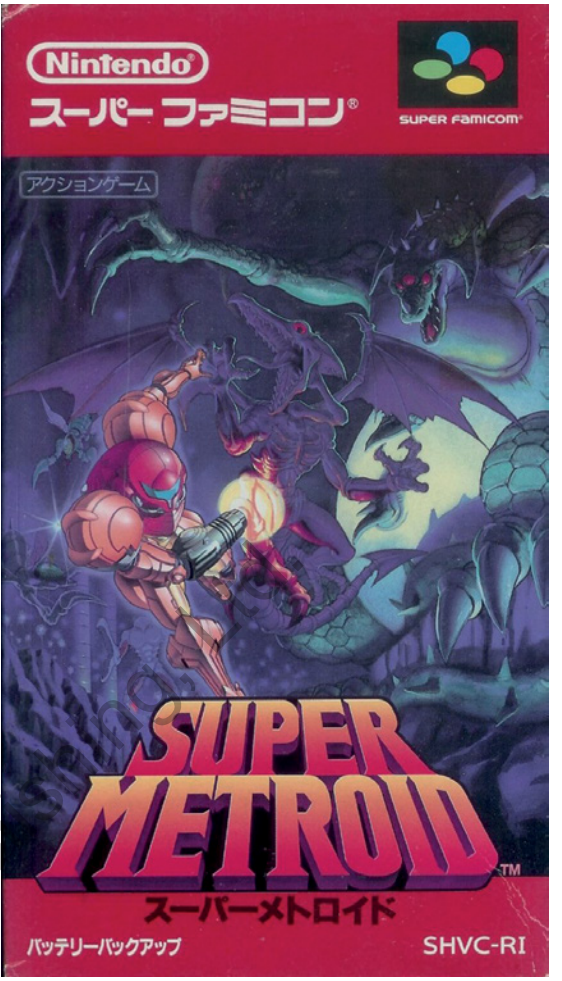
FUN FACT:

Metroid cocreator Yoshio Sakamoto nagged his superiors for half a year before they finally gave the go-ahead for Super Metroid in late 1991. Even so, the powers that be, Gunpei Yokoi in particular, didn't initially exhibit much faith in the game. Sakamoto described Yokoi's early attitude toward the project: "Yokoi-san was always angry when he saw us all completely absorbed and working crazy overtime on Super Metroid. He came in and said, 'Are you lot trying to produce a work of art or something?' Yokoi-san was becoming angrier with us day by day during that period." Yokoi was so unhappy about the project's delays that he threatened to cancel Super Metroid on three separate occasions. Obviously Yokoi never followed through with his threats and eventually grew to love the game.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

I can't conceive a single reason for why Super Metroid wouldn't make the list. It checks all the boxes. Is it of the highest quality? Check. Is it groundbreaking? Check. Has it aged well? Check. Did it further the legacy of the franchise? Check. Is it fun? ABSOLUTELY CHECK!

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast



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CHAPTER 82

SUPER SMASH T.V.

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: TOP-DOWN SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: WILLIAMS ELECTRONICS
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

The Year is 1999. Television has adapted to the more violent nature of man. The most popular form of television remains the game show. One show in particular has dominated the ratings. That show is Smash T.V. The most violent game show of all time.

Two lucky contestants compete for cash and prizes. Each contestant is armed with an assortment of powerful weapons and sent into a closed arena. The action takes place in front of a studio audience and is broadcast live via satellite around the world. Be prepared, the future is now.

You are the next lucky contestant!

—From the *Super Smash T.V.* manual

With the huge success of the original arcade version of *Smash T.V.* (1990), it was only natural for home consoles to jump on board. The Nintendo Entertainment System had an 8-bit version of the game, then a 16-bit Super NES rendition called *Super Smash T.V.* followed. Despite the name change, it is a straight-up port of the arcade classic. (*Smash T.V.* was also ported to the Game Gear, Master System, and Genesis. For the computer market, Ocean published ports for the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, and Amiga.)

The concept for the game was the brainchild of Eugene Jarvis, who created various other historically important classics, including *Defender* and *Robotron: 2084*. Gameplay is similar to *Robotron*, and the plot and design were influenced by the 1987 films *The Running Man* and *RoboCop*. In fact, one of the announcers' lines in the game is "I'd buy that for a dollar," which is a direct quote from *RoboCop*.

According to the programmers of *Smash T.V.*, among them Mark Turmell of *NBA Jam* fame, the original layout of the game had blood, but just a pixel here and a pixel there. However, they decided to test the limits and go above and beyond most gory games such as *Mortal Kombat*, and they did not disappoint. The blood quotient is in a class of its own, bringing many people to the game just to see how bloody it really was. Then many of these players would get hooked and put in more quarters to see what the next screen would bring.

Not surprisingly, the arcade game has higher-resolution graphics than the Super Nintendo port, but the home game looks great nevertheless and retains most of the blood (only the big blood sprays from certain bosses are missing). Better yet, the game manages

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to display dozens of sprites with little to no slowdown. The SNES game isn't quite as fast as its coin-op cousin, but it's a speedy game nonetheless.

In a recent interview I conducted with Jamie Rivett, the lead developer of the SNES port, he revealed that he was happy with the game and provided some behind-the-scenes info:

> All the heavy optimizations and work really paid off because the Super Nintendo version was actually a pretty faithful conversion of the actual game. We never got source code, but I was able to replicate the various enemies by playing the game, and in some ways this was more fun than if I had been given the code for everything. The one thing that Mark [Turmell] did give up was the spawn tables for each level. That defined which enemies, how many, max on screen, and what rate they came in. I think this is what really gave the SNES version the authentic feel.

When I was 16, I absolutely loved *Smash T.V.* The announcer's voice, the game-show-style presentation, and the intense shooting action made it super appealing to me. I was excited for the home versions because the arcade game was taking all my money—it is one of the hardest coin-ops to finish on just a few credits. At home I could play the game again and again without spending loads of money (except for the money it took to purchase the game, of course). To this day I still play it when I have a chance. If given the choice, I will always play the SNES version, since it's the most realistic of the vintage ports.

Super Smash T.V. is likely not the first game you think of when it comes to the Super Nintendo, but it is a nice change of pace when you want a break from all the family-friendly, first-party titles such as *Super Mario World* and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*.

In this hard-core shooter you are a contestant on a vicious, violent game show. With the cameras rolling, the announcer says, "Good Luck, You'll Need It!" The action begins with you (or you and a friend in simultaneous two-player mode) entering the first room on the game show stage. Armed with a machine gun, you must run for your life in a series of closed arenas, avoiding bullets and bombs while blowing away baseball-bat-wielding gangs, laser-firing orbs, exploding tin soldiers, and other killers bent on your destruction. There at times are up to 20 different enemies on screen at once in the Super Nintendo version, and up to 30 in the arcade game. There are few breaks to catch your breath, since more enemies come out the instant you kill the others. Each arena has different enemies and attack patterns for you to contend with.

Along the way you'll pick up such prizes as money and gold bricks—be careful, though; they may be sitting on top of a hidden land mine. You'll also find grenade launchers, photon guns, missile launchers, and other weapons. After you clear a stage you will have the option of going to a couple of different rooms. Over time you'll learn which routes are easiest to travel and which arenas have more prizes for you to grab. At the end of each of the four rounds of play, a boss awaits: Mutoid Man, Scarface, Cobra Head, or The Game Show Host With The Most. Regular machine gun fire won't work on them, so you must use your special firepower. There are more than 45 levels of carnage, plus bonus stages.

Playing *Smash T.V.* can be difficult at home. One of the coolest things about the arcade version is the dual joystick control, which lets you move your character in one direction and fire in another at the same time. The challenge was to replicate that for consoles. The NES did a good job of utilizing both controllers for a one-player game and four controllers for two-player action. Super Nintendo controllers have extra buttons, so you can use them to shoot up, down, left, or right while you guide your character with the d-pad. It's not a perfect solution, but it gets the job done. In fact, it works pretty well.

When *Super Smash T.V.* was released, it garnered high marks from such publications as *Computer and Video Games*, which called it "the most awesome home arcade blaster yet seen," and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, which hailed it as a "winning effort that fans of the coin-op should not miss."

The action can get a little repetitive, as certain magazine and website reviews point out, but most gamers agree that it is a highly entertaining shooter overall.

In my interview with Jamie Rivett, he further described his satisfaction with the port: "All the

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conversion shops said no to *Smash T.V.* because they thought it was impossible to replicate on the home consoles. I guess we proved them wrong!"

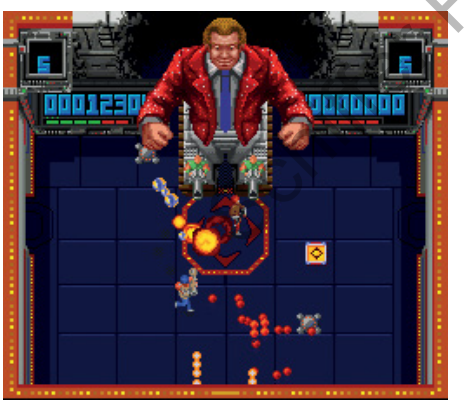
FUN FACT:

After finishing Super Smash T.V., programmer Jamie Rivett realized that he had optimized the game so much that it could run faster, so he added a turbo mode after completing the regular game. After he implemented this, he would play the game only in that mode.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Super Smash T.V. is a controller-gripping, heart-pounding shoot-'em-up that will blow your mind. No cutscenes, prolonged buildup, or rescuing princesses here—just lots of ass kicking and taking names. Experience everything that made the arcade game great in the comfort of your home—it's a great way to "kill" an afternoon.

—Todd Friedman, author of Walter Day's Gaming Superstars, Volume 1, writer for Old School Gamer Magazine



Publishing

CHAPTER 83

TECMO BOWL

NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: SPORTS/FOOTBALL
PUBLISHER: TECMO
DEVELOPER: TECMO
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1989

Before there was Madden, there was *Tecmo Bowl*. This was the title that basically kicked off widespread video game football popularity. And it came from an unlikely source—a relatively little-known (at the time) Japanese developer called Tecmo. Up until that point, Tecmo had released mostly unconventional action games such as *Rygar*, a mythological side-scroller starring a hero wielding a shield on a chain, and *Mighty Bomb Jack*, a quirky explosive action puzzler. So it was quite the departure for the studio to tackle something as mainstream as American football.

Tecmo Bowl began as a dual-screen arcade title that allowed up to four players to compete in a match between two fictitious teams. But it was the home port where things really clicked, in large part thanks to the license from the NFL Players Association, which allowed it to become the first console game to include real NFL players. This was a game changer. For the first time ever, gamers could play as digitized versions of their favorite football heroes such as John Elway, Jerry Rice, and Lawrence Taylor.

There wasn't another game that could have been more perfectly timed to my youth. Growing up, football and video games were just about everything to me. On weekends, my friends and I would don our officially NFL-licensed football gear (I dressed as my hero, San Francisco 49ers' Joe Montana) and play two-hand touch in the yard for hours, taking only the occasional break for iced tea (the mostly sugar Lipton powder kind that you could scoop as much as you wanted into the pitcher for maximum flavor). After wearing ourselves out, we'd head to my friend's basement for sleepovers—which meant hanging out in our sleeping bags and playing NES all night. This is where *Tecmo Bowl* became such a fixture of my youth. It was two-player video game sports competition at its purest and finest.

While Tecmo acquired the rights from the NFL Players Association to an amazing roster of 1987–1988 NFL season players (and modeled their stats off the real-life counterparts), getting the NFL's license to the actual team names was another story. Tecmo skirted the issue, instead using the locations for 12 of the most popular teams at the time: New York, Chicago, Minnesota, Dallas, San Francisco, Washington, Los Angeles, Denver, Seattle, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Miami. Another limitation was that the game allowed only nine players to a side (as opposed to 11 in real life). Due to hardware constraints, having fewer on-screen players was common in football games until *John Madden Football* came along (Madden famously forced EA to make it 11 or he wouldn't allow his name to be associated with it).

But these limitations all worked in the game's favor. A big part of *Tecmo Bowl*'s appeal—and one of the things that still compels players to boot it up 30-odd years later—was the elegance of its simplicity. Players on offense would call one of four plays (two running and two passing, aside from San Francisco and Miami, which had three passing), and defense would then counter by guessing which of the plays were called. This was accomplished by choosing with the direction pad and pressing A so opponents didn't know which plays were selected (unless they caught a glimpse of one another's controllers). And this simple game of rock, paper, scissors allowed for strategy with little interruption to the action.

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Once on the field, gameplay was similarly quick to grasp. Running plays automatically handed the ball to your running back, where you'd then seek a way through the defensive line, and passes were a game of selecting the most open receiver and tossing the ball before getting sacked. Several aspects of real-life NFL were simplified or tossed out in the spirit of keeping the game fun and arcade-like, such as no fumbles, touchbacks, fair catches, or penalties. Similarly, quarters were kept short and sweet at 90 seconds (though the clock stopped with every play).

Despite the simplicity on the surface, there was actually a lot of depth in learning the playbooks and player stats and how teams matched up against one another. There was also a full single-player season mode with a password save system where players could hone their skills defeating each team to reach the "Tecmo Bowl"—though the game was really at its best when played with two players.

Tecmo Bowl also had a lot of charm. One thing that many players will instantly remember is its use of music to complement the action, something rarely seen in sports video games of the time. Different songs were used to indicate the start of plays, interceptions, touchdowns, and other in-game events, and these super-catchy melodies never got old. Entertaining halftime shows also featured crowds, cheerleaders, and even nods to other Tecmo games.

Ultimately, four years later the game was improved upon in just about every way for its sequel, *Super Tecmo Bowl*, and that game even included the NFL license for team names. But it was this original that so many fans still point to as the best sports game of all time—in large part because of what it meant to them during that era. For me, those halcyon days of playing *Tecmo Bowl* with friends all night, using our NFL heroes, created memories for a lifetime.

FUN FACT:

Bo Jackson was notoriously overpowered in the game—so much so that in 2020, USA Today hailed him as the greatest video game athlete of all time. The Raiders were the team you'd want to play as simply because of Bo. If you had Bo on offense, and the defense chose wrong, there was basically no stopping him. This bit of video game history even became the premise for a set of Kia car commercials in 2016, in which the real-life Bo Jackson drove a Sorento onto the field in a game of Tecmo Bowl.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Plain and simple, this is the gridiron game that started it all. While Football for the Atari 2600 and NFL Football for the Intellivision were popular for their respective consoles, Tecmo Bowl truly popularized the notion of video game football. For many of us, it represents some of the fondest memories of our youths playing games with friends.

—Sam Kennedy, 1UP.com cofounder and former editorial director, cofounder, and executive producer at Tigertron

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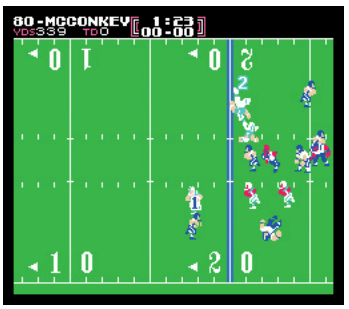

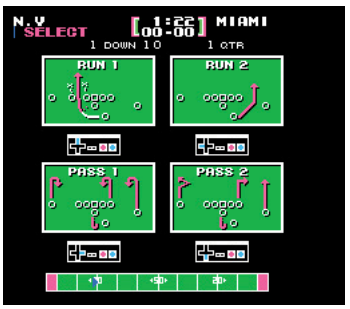

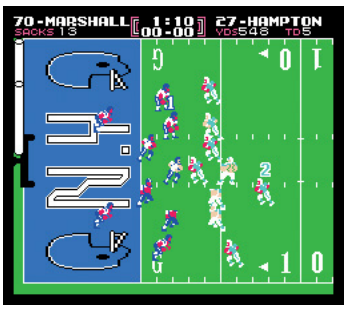

CHAPTER 84

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES IV: TURTLES IN TIME

SUPER NINTENDO
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING COMBAT
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Konami
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1992

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During the late '80s, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles rose from an obscure black-and-white comic book series to a household name. As such, the '90s welcomed the mutated reptiles in glorious fashion. The cartoon had been entertaining kids since 1987, and with the release of Jim Henson's live-action film adaptation in 1990, the "Heroes in a Half-Shell" became a cultural force to reckon with.

In 1989, fans of the comics and cartoon TV series got their first taste of the Turtles in their video game forms. Konami's self-titled beat-'em-up arcade game was praised for its fun multiplayer action and visuals that were faithful to the franchise.

On the home front, we got the first TMNT video game on the Nintendo Entertainment System, also called *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. While it was a solid (if frustratingly difficult) game, many fans were puzzled as to why the console version was so much different than the arcade game. A year later, Konami brought their coin-op classic home with *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Arcade Game*. While it was hardly arcade perfect, the game was well received by fans.

In 1991, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time* was released in arcades, informing fans of the franchise that the quirky quartet showed no signs of slowing down in their video adventures. It was similar to the original TMNT arcade game but showed improvement in every reviewable category, including music, graphics, and gameplay.

In 1992, a year that saw *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III: The Manhattan Project* on the NES and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Hyperstone Heist* on the Genesis, *Turtles in Time* was ported to the Super Nintendo. The response among gamers and critics alike was overwhelmingly positive. While it wasn't a complete one-to-one re-creation of the arcade hit, it had stellar graphics and excellent controls. With *Electronic Gaming Monthly* grading it a glorious 9 out of 10, fans were excited to give the game a go. It took no time for fans to fall in love with such a faithfully adapted port of a great game. Those of us who rented video games found that the cartridge was in short supply due to its popularity, and we often had to wait weeks or even months between rentals.

The story is par for the course for the Turtles, if a little over the top. Our heroes fight through hoards of Foot Soldiers and other minions to retrieve the Statue of Liberty, which Shredder and Krang stole live on TV. When the turtles defeat Shredder in his first appearance of the game, they are sent back in time. They must fight through history and Shredder's goons to get back to the present. A silly plot for sure, but a fun one given the characters involved.

Once you pick the turtle of your choice (sing it with me, "Leonardo leads, Donatello loves machines,

Raphael is cool but crude, Michelangelo is a party dude!"), you enter the first stage. Foot Soldiers immediately attack as you begin to plan your strategy. With only two buttons to focus on, you use Y to attack and B to jump. Each turtle has their signature weapon—katana, nunchaku, bo staff, or Sai—and will attack with them both on the ground and in the air. Along the way you can pick up boxed pizzas to refill your health and a bomb box that briefly turns your character into an invincible spinning fury.

On top of beating up enemies, you must dodge obstacles and projectiles. In the first stage the giant robotic Krang stares menacingly while firing lasers from his eyes. Pitfalls are scattered through the levels, constantly testing your ninja reflexes. There are a few interactive objects that can work to your advantage, such as the ability to hurl fire hydrant lids at your opponents.

Konami did their best to retain the arcade game's story line and as many of the voice effects and cutscenes as they could. While the Super Nintendo couldn't handle a lot of dialogue, they included enough to get the job done, and the voices sounded pretty good. The rest was relegated to on-screen text that gave the game the feel of a classic cartoon.

The port took full advantage of the Super Nintendo's vaunted Mode 7 capabilities. An example of this is an early boss battle with Shredder in a robot suit. The battle uniquely places him in the foreground, requiring you to throw Foot Soldiers toward the screen to hit him. The player must split their focus between Shredder's and the Foot Soldiers' attacks. They also extended the Neon Nightriders stage from the arcade, giving it twists and turns, making the stage longer and more engaging.

My only real complaint with the game is that it lacked the four-player compatibility found in the arcade original. However, it wasn't a terribly surprising omission since the Super Nintendo wouldn't get a multitap adapter until 1993. One nice thing about the port is that when you lose all your lives and need to continue, you don't have to move around the cabinet to the controller assigned to the turtle of your choice—you can simply scroll through them.

You diehard Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fans may remember the most obvious change when the game was ported to the Super Nintendo. The coin-op's opening theme is "Pizza Power" from the 1990 *Coming Out of Their Shells* live stage show. The SNES game features an instrumental version of the cartoon's theme song. Even though they changed the opening song, the ending still features "Pizza Power," just in 16-bit and without lead vocals. This cracked me up back in the day, but it didn't stop my brothers and me from singing along to the song as the end credits played.

There were some nice surprises with the port. Rocksteady and Bebop were added to the pirate stage as pirate ship bosses, replacing Tokka, the mutant wolf, and Rahzar, the mutated snapping turtle. Those two characters, which came from the movie, are relegated to midlevel bosses that appear before you take on Shredder the first time. Neither of them had been in the animated series at this point, so this acted as a direct tie-in to the movie, yet they still looked like cartoon characters, which was neat (Tokka and Rahzar would eventually cross over to the cartoon for a brief appearance in the seventh season). Another interesting change was the inclusion of Super Shredder as the final boss, as opposed to regular Shredder, who was the boss of the arcade game.

Turtles in Time is a staple on listings of the top games for the console. For example, Nintendo Life (www.nintendolife.com) ranked it #12 on its list of "Best Super Nintendo Games," while IGN (www.ign.com) ranked it #39 (a bit low, if you ask me) on their list of "Top 100 SNES Games of All Time."

For years, fans have waited for Konami to re-release *Turtles in Time* on newer consoles, and they finally got their wish in 2022, with the 13-game compilation title, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection*. It was produced for the PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X|S, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, and PC Steam.

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FUN FACT:

In 2009, Ubisoft released Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time Re-Shelled for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. It is a reimagining of the classic arcade game, with 3-D graphics, new music, and new sound effects.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The TMNT games have been a staple of the video game industry since the NES days. While the games have varied in quality over the years, Turtles in Time, whether in the arcades or on the SNES, is widely considered the pinnacle of the franchise.

—Zoe Howard, cocreator of Retro Gamer Girls, author of November's End and The Hunters Realm

The Turtles Are In For The Times Of Their Lives.

Cowabunga, courageous ninja dudes, it's TMNT™–Turtles In Time™ for Super NES. The fab four are in a time warped tail spin direct from the second arcade game. And there's a most bodacious bonus. Now you can also go shell-to-shell in a tasty turtle bash-o-rama mode and find out who's the most radical reptile of them all.

Take on 10 explosive levels featuring humungoso 3D graphics. You've got nine Turtle attack moves to use including the Catapult, Cannon Ball and Bulldozer. This dizzying trek through time takes you A.D., B.C. and A.D. again. You'll be hurled through time so much you may hurl yourself. But don't forget your mission: to find April O'Neil (schwing!) and the stolen Statue of Liberty before Shredder makes a mega size lawn ornament out of her. So achieve total turtlosity and go for it!

KONAMI®

◀Check it out, dudes. Arcade screenage on the left, Super NES screenage on the right. They're, like, turtley the same! Aren't those studs at Konami awesome?

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CHAPTER 85

TEKKEN 3

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
DEVELOPER: NAMCO
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1998

Back in the day there was an unofficial tradition at the local Aladdin's Castle arcade in my hometown called the "Wall of Shame." The idea was simple: if you lost a match to a "perfect" victory (i.e., the victor took zero damage) in a fighting game, your name was "on the wall" until you achieved a "perfect" victory against someone else or defeated the player who put you on the wall with a no-fall fight (typically three straight rounds won). The tradition originated among the fighting-game enthusiasts that I hung around with at the arcade, where we literally had a dry-erase board listing the "shamed" behind the prize counter. The Wall of Shame remained confined to the arcade until it finally found a worthy vessel for entering our living rooms in the form of Namco's *Tekken 3* for the PlayStation in 1998.

Gaming in the 1990s was dominated by fighting titles, and while Capcom's *Street Fighter II* instigated the trend, it was hardly the only competitor in the ring. Seemingly every major game developer tried their hand at the genre, just as game technology was teetering on the threshold of the next big thing: 3-D graphics. While Capcom and some of its contemporaries persisted with 2-D pixel-based graphics, arcade mainstay developer Namco began seriously investing in 3-D technology in the early '90s, creating several new intellectual properties in the process, including their take on the fighting-game genre with the 3-D polygonal martial arts battler *Tekken* (The King of Iron Fist Tournament), originally released into arcades in December 1994 and ported afterward to the PlayStation.

Though initially tagged as a copycat of Sega's *Virtua Fighter*, *Tekken* had staying power of its own, and the game's success inevitably led to sequels on a regular basis, with *Tekken 3* releasing in arcades in spring 1997. The game featured a large roster of eclectic characters based on classic martial arts archetypes clearly inspired by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and others. The game's various fighting styles are based on real-world disciplines from around the globe, including kung fu, tai chi quon, jeet kune do, lucha libre, and even capoeira, a rhythmic martial art style never really seen in gaming before. This impressive variety provided a sense of authenticity and depth that was simply missing from most of *Tekken 3*'s contemporaries.

By the time Namco released *Tekken 3* on the PlayStation in spring 1998, the *Tekken* IP was already an arcade and PlayStation staple. While hindsight more than two decades later might indicate releasing the game on the PlayStation to have been a no-brainer, Namco was initially hesitant to convert *Tekken 3* to the 32-bit home console. The arcade game wasn't necessarily the most technologically advanced title at the time (it was criticized for visually not quite being on par with Sega's Model 3 hardware games of the day such as *Virtua Fighter 3*), but the arcade cabinet's Namco System 12 hardware was still nearly twice as powerful as Sony's PlayStation.

Namco had concerns over the level of optimization that would be required to port the title to lower-end hardware for the home market, and though Nintendo's 64-bit console had plenty of processing power, the notoriously limited storage capacity of the Nintendo 64's cartridges ruled it out of consideration rather quickly, leaving Namco with the risky decision to either port the game to the PlayStation or wait for the next generation of home consoles. Luckily for gamers,

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Namco pulled a rabbit out of their hat and delivered what is arguably the best fighting game of its hardware generation and one of the best arcade home conversions of all time.

While optimized compared to its arcade counterpart, *Tekken 3* is still a technically impressive PlayStation game. It runs at a slightly lower screen resolution than the arcade, and the characters' polygon counts have been reduced, but the game keeps a healthy frame rate, and all the character models look solid for their time, with clean textures and excellent animations. The game's environments are clearly where most of the visual optimization was executed in the PlayStation port, though. Most of the arenas are simply a square plane aligned with a panoramic background plane and missing a lot of the visual elements that livened up the coin-op version's levels. Visually effective most of the time, this stripped-down approach can appear overly simplistic, especially when the camera zooms too far out or drastically pitches as players distance themselves from one another.

Despite these limitations, *Tekken 3* is the most genuinely three-dimensional game in the series up to that point, making foreground and background sidestepping standard fare for all the characters. This was a big change from the previous *Tekken* games, where only certain characters had specific evasive moves that utilized the 3-D environment. Allowing all the characters to navigate the 3-D game space enabled players to experiment with how they approached opponents and be more strategic with defensive tactics, creating real drama during fights.

Additionally, the weakness in the environments' presentation partly informed the decision to drastically reduce the characters' jumping heights compared to the previous titles, thus limiting the frequency of visual hitches and maintaining the game's pace by reducing the amount of time characters could spend out of reach. Keeping that pace up in the home version was important in offsetting its slightly slower gameplay. Though occasionally criticized as enabling "button mashers," this slight reduction in speed actually increases the game's accessibility for new players by subtly lowering the reaction times needed to perform many of the game's more advanced moves. Optimizations like this combine to give *Tekken 3* a grounded feel with a hint of reality and make the game seem less gimmicky than its contemporaries.

The rest of *Tekken 3*'s production values are all top tier, remaining fairly faithful to the arcade cab. The coin-op game's energetic "electronic funk" soundtrack was greatly expanded upon for the home version with a swath of new tracks, and characters who'd merely been skin swaps in the arcade version were given new unique voices for the console port. The franchise's intuitive four-button control scheme is a natural fit for Sony's controller design, and with *Tekken 3* it remains tight and responsive, maintaining accessibility while keeping hard-core depth intact, ensuring that experienced

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players can still obliterate opponents with advanced techniques mastered in the arcade.

The PlayStation version boasts additional modes in the form of Tekken Force, a side-scrolling beat-'em-up-style minigame, and Tekken Ball, a martial-arts-infused take on volleyball. These additions might not be revolutionary, but they are nice touches that show the genuine effort Namco made to deliver more than a bare-bones arcade conversion. Given how solid *Tekken 3*'s core gameplay is, combined with the largest roster of any 3-D fighting game of its day (more than 20 unique characters in all) and tons of prerendered cutscenes fleshing out the game's story, the game undeniably feels complete. The story might not be Pulitzer material, but it does a great job contextualizing all the characters fighting in the King of Iron Fist Tournament. Set 20 years after the events of *Tekken 2*, *Tekken 3* focuses on the drama surrounding series mainstay characters Heihachi Mishima and his grandson Jin Kazama, played out against a near-future backdrop that melds classical Japanese feudalism with corporate warfare, perpetuating the narrative arc that remains the core story of the franchise to this day.

Now a quarter century since its release on the PlayStation, *Tekken 3* maintains an impressive 96% Metacritic rating and is regularly included in "greatest games of all time" lists. The game sold roughly 8.36 million copies and ranks as the fourth-bestselling title of all time for the original PlayStation console. Its success guaranteed a future for the franchise both at home and in arcades, spawning additional sequels, crossovers, and spin-offs that Namco continues to produce to this day. Most recently, *Tekken 3* was a featured title on the PlayStation Classic miniconsole released in 2018. Though the series has certainly made vast technical strides over the years, with ever-improving audiovisuals and a constantly evolving fighting system, *Tekken 3* remains a watershed moment not just for its own franchise, but for the entire fighting genre.

FUN FACT:

Tekken 3 on the PlayStation was the first game in the series to feature a playable non-Namco character in the form of Gon, the tiny titular dinosaur from the acclaimed wordless manga by Masashi Tanaka.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

With tight play control, deep fighting mechanics, and outstanding production values, Tekken 3 is a spectacular port and a must-own for the original PlayStation.

—Kale Menges, artist and game developer

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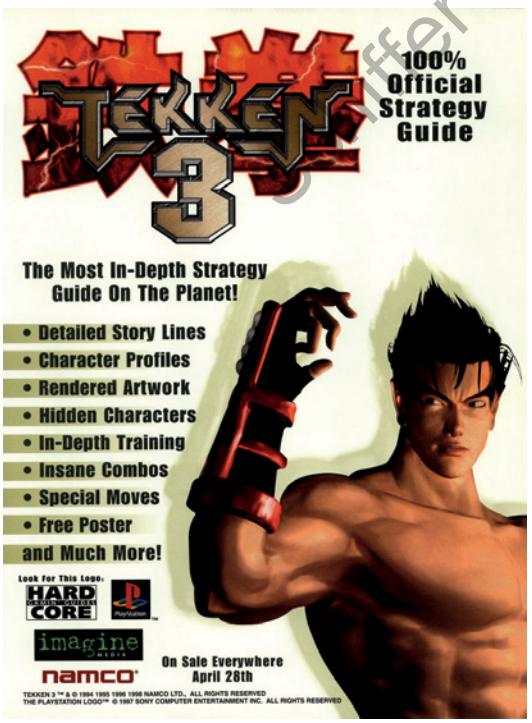

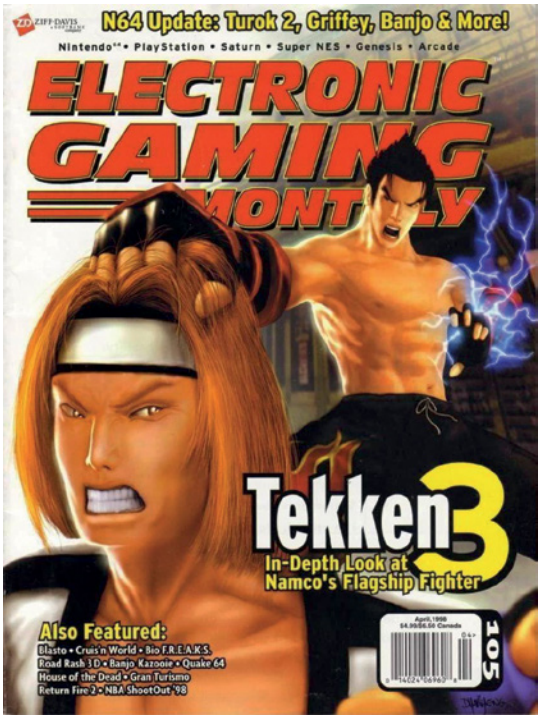

CHAPTER 86

TEMPEST 2000

ATARI JAGUAR
GENRE: TOP-DOWN SHOOTER / TUBE SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: LLAMASOFT
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

When the Atari Jaguar was launched in November 1993, I was not interested in it at all. The games that were slated to release on day one, or close to it, didn't look promising, and that controller—UGH! I already had a Super Nintendo, a Sega Genesis with the Sega CD add-on, a Game Boy, and a Game Gear, so I decided to pass on Atari's obvious last attempt to get some of that '90s gaming cash in favor of the consoles I already owned.

One day, in spring 1994, a close friend of mine told me about his recent trip to see his girlfriend's brother, and that he had a Jaguar that they played all afternoon. He mentioned that he had tried *Cybermorph* (he described it as "clunky as all hell") and *Trevor McFur in the Crescent Galaxy* ("just awful"), and he didn't recommend them. However, there was one game he couldn't stop raving about: *Tempest 2000*. I remember saying to him, "It's just *Tempest*. What could have possibly been done to it to make it any better?," since the arcade original was one of my favorite coin-ops of all time. He then said the magic words: "The music is amazing." My interest was instantly piqued.

There was a video game store near my home called Die Hard Game Fan that had put an Atari Jaguar out on the floor for people to play to drum up customer interest and drive possible sales. A few days after my conversation about *Tempest 2000*, I went to the store and asked the friendly owner if I could test the game. Luckily he had a used copy on hand. If I recall his story correctly, someone had purchased the console a couple of weeks earlier, along with a copy of each game available at the time, and within a week had traded it all in for store credit. I sat down to play it and was not prepared for what was in store (so to speak).

Not only was *Tempest 2000* an impressive visual upgrade from the original, the janky controller worked very well with this type of action. Plus, my friend was absolutely right—the music was AMAZING! We're talking fast-paced techno-rave music that got you energized to play some video games, and the first-stage theme was an earworm like none other. I was humming it for days afterward. I could play the game for only 15 minutes, but I was sold. I simply had to have an Atari Jaguar and a copy of *Tempest 2000*. I saved my meager paychecks—I was a phone operator for JC Penney, taking orders from catalog customers—for two months, and soon enough I was hooking the bulky and downright ugly console up to my CRT television set and playing the game for hours on end.

Tempest is a "tube shooter" where you fire into the screen while playing on a geometric-shaped playfield called a "web." You guide a ship moving along the edge of the web, which stretches off into the distance away from the player while enemies travel up from the far end to kill you. You must shoot these enemies before they can reach the edge, where they will take you out easily. The better you perform, the higher your score.

Lead programmer Jeff Minter added a variety of new features to *Tempest 2000*, including the ability to jump, power-ups that give you a stronger main weapon, screen-clearing bombs, and an AI-controlled bot that fires alongside you. The graphics have also been upgraded significantly. Instead of plain vector graphics, the webs are now filled with colorful dayglo gradients, with particles flying at the screen whenever you destroy an enemy or acquire a power-up. There are also bonus stages that act as stage warps, where you fly through rings while amber storm clouds rage overhead. It's a beautiful game for sure.

The high-energy electronic score was composed by Ian Howe, Alastair Lindsay, Julian Hodgson, and Kevin Saville of Imagitec Design (also known as Dream Weavers).

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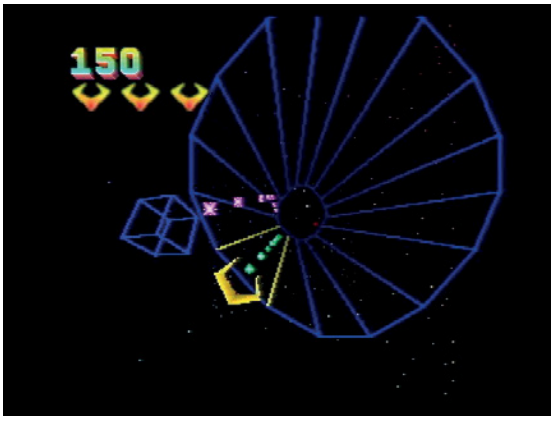
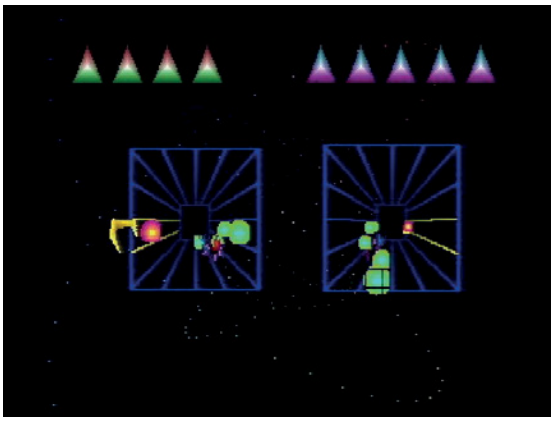
At the time it was unheard of to hear CD-quality music with uncompressed voice samples coming from a cartridge-based game. Each time I reached a new set of stages and the music would switch over to another track, I would become more and more impressed with what the folks at Imagitec were able to do with the limitations of the format. The score was so well loved that it was released on a CD that you could order directly only from Atari (and you better believe I did just that). I told my friends that you could play some of these tracks at a dance club and no one would know that it came from a video game. Especially "Mind's Eye," which plays over the first set of stages. It's fantastic and still holds up.

I had a ton of fun playing *Tempest 2000*. Sure, I added more games to my Jaguar collection, but I always came back to it in the end. It was simple yet involved (keeping track of everything going on in the later stages was a feat in and of itself) and easy to learn but hard to master (the jump ability could either save you from a tight spot or spell certain doom if not timed correctly). It's the perfect game to unwind with after a long day of work. Pure escapism that didn't rely on story, managing inventories, or convoluted controller movements. The only bummer was that I never experienced the two-player mode. I hear it's super fun.

About a year after I got my Jaguar, I got bored with the console, since there weren't many good games available for it (*Alien vs. Predator* being the only other one that comes to mind). As such, I sold it and my cartridge collection off in favor of a PlayStation (which eventually received a great port of *Tempest 2000* called *Tempest X3*). I continue to find it funny that *Tempest 2000*, an upgraded port of a simple arcade game, is widely regarded as the best game ever produced for the doomed console, but I have to agree with that assessment. Currently I do not own an Atari Jaguar, but I do have a copy of *Tempest 2000*. Because reasons.





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FUN FACT:

Since Tempest 2000's release, there have been many ports to other consoles that have stuck closely to the formula. The PS1 and Sega Saturn received the aforementioned Tempest X3, the ill-fated Nuon had Tempest 3000, and the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One got Tempest 4000. All are similar except for minor visual upgrades and feature the same musical score as Tempest 2000.

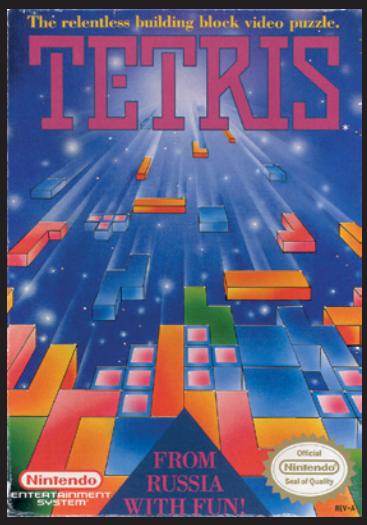
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Not only did Tempest 2000 up the ante on what the original was in every way, it kept the core gameplay intact and didn't try to reinvent it as some crazy 3-D monstrosity to show off the capabilities of the next-gen consoles. Plus, it's extremely fun—that's all I ask of a video game.

—Christopher "the Old Ass Retro Gamer" Pico, filmmaker, and gaming YouTuber

CHAPTER 87

TETRIS



NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: ACTION PUZZLE
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D1
1 PLAYER
1989

In the early 1990s, I owned a pair of comic book stores with my brother-in-law and good friend Michael Davis, who is married to my sister Kelly and is into all the geeky stuff I'm into, including science fiction and horror movies and computer and video games (I've mentioned Mike a number of times in my "Tales from a Retro Gamer" YouTube show). This business partnership was during a boom for the comic book industry, and we had a great run.

Highlights during our retail days include our legendary back-issue sales, hosting an Adam West autographing at our main store, being one of just five stores in North Texas invited to participate in the Marvel Mega Tour (where the official Cyclops came to our store and I got to have dinner with Clive Barker and Stan Lee), and being absolutely overrun with customers and media attention during the Death of Superman hoopla.

After more than three years of a fun but sometimes tumultuous partnership (they say you should never go into business with family members, but I'm grateful for the experience, and people still tell us how much they loved Fantastic Comic & Cards), we parted ways. I sold my share of the business to Mike, meaning I had a little extra money and was in no hurry to get another job. Plus, I was burned out from working long hours and needed a break!

Over the next three months my newly unemployed self rose early every morning to write short stories. Writing was something I had always wanted to do, and I was finally getting serious about it. My typing with intent eventually led to some minor success in small-press publications (I've since collected these stories in a book called *The Arcade and Other Strange Tales*), but that's a story for another day. What's relevant here is that each afternoon during those three months I played the Nintendo version of *Tetris* on my NES. I played other games as well, such as *Castlevania* and *Contra*, but *Tetris* was sucking up around three or four hours of my time most days. It was cathartic and relaxing, not to mention a ton of fun. Also I was stone-cold addicted.

After three months of pretending I was a full-time writer (with a part-time addiction to *Tetris*), I decided it was time to look for a real job. After filling out a number of applications at bookstores and comic shops, I was hired by Half-Price Books, one of my favorite stores, but when I arrived for my first day of work they told me the person whose place I was taking had come back, so the position was no longer available. I was angry and disappointed, but luckily Waldenbooks called a short time later and offered me a receiving-clerk job, which I gladly accepted. I also stopped playing *Tetris* (temporarily) around this time, because one afternoon, while driving into downtown Fort Worth, I imagined that the buildings along the skyline were being fitted with nonexistent buildings that were falling from the skies. I clearly had a problem, and it was time to go cold turkey.

In case you've been living under the proverbial rock for the past few decades, *Tetris* has players manipulating seven different types of blocks (called tetrominoes) that descend, one at a time, down the playfield. The blocks can be rotated and moved right and left. The objective is to piece them together to form horizontal lines. When an unbroken line is formed it disappears, clearing up space. Clearing two to four rows at

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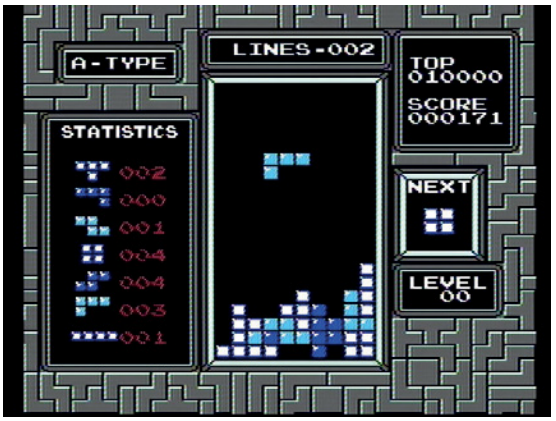

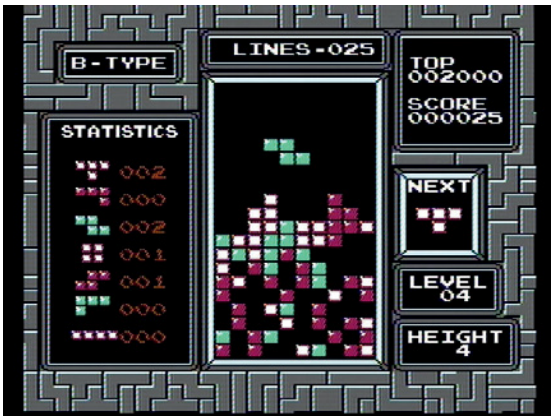

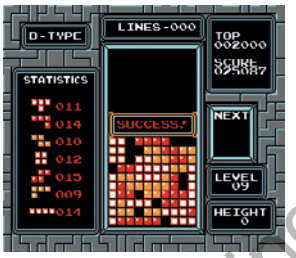

once gives players extra points. If the blocks pile up to the top of the screen (an eventual inevitability), the game will end. In the Nintendo-published NES version of the game (as opposed to the Tengen rendition, which I'll get to later), Mode A is an endurance test in which players try to complete as many lines as possible, while mode B is a contest to complete 25 lines. Plus you can select from three types of music.

A simple title with no real story line or characters to identify with, *Tetris* is nevertheless one of the all-time-great video games. In fact, many gamers call the fine-tuned puzzler perfection personified. It frequently shows up on best-of lists and it engages all types of players, from casual to hard core and from young to old, and everyone in between. It's been ported to countless platforms and has won numerous awards and accolades, including earning a second-place slot on the "Top 50 Console Games of All Time" list in the 2009 iteration of the *Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition*. In issue #100 of *Game Informer* (August 2001) the game was ranked third on the list of "Top 100 Games of All Time," just behind *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros.* In 1989, the Software Publisher's Association gave *Tetris* four, um, awards, at the Excellence in Software Awards.

Tetris was invented in 1984 by Alexey Pajitnov, who created the game on an Elektronika 60 computer while developing software for the Dorodnitsyn Computing Centre of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, a governmental research and development center in Moscow. The title of the game comes from a combination of "tetra" (meaning "four") and "tennis," which was Pajitnov's favorite sport. In 1985 the game was ported to the IBM PC, and it swept across the Soviet Union like a virus. The game launched on PCs in North America and Europe in 1987, extending its appeal well beyond the Iron Curtain. In 1988, Henk Rogers discovered the game at a Las Vegas trade show. Shortly thereafter his company, Bullet-Proof Software, released it on the PC and Famicom in Japan. The next year, Rogers secured the handhelds rights to the game and licensed those rights to Nintendo, who wisely included the game as the pack-in title with their new Game Boy, helping the portable device sell millions and millions of units.

Nintendo also brought the game to their NES in 1989 (as you probably suspected, since that's the version this essay is primarily about). However, Tengen, a division of Atari, beat Nintendo to the punch by porting an unlicensed version to the console a few months earlier. Atari owned the rights to produce an arcade version of the game, but not for home consoles. Nintendo successfully sued Atari to have that rendition of the game taken off store shelves, meaning the Tengen version is much harder to find in today's collectors' market than the one published by Nintendo. The Tengen game benefits from two-player split-screen action (cooperative or competitive), making it a favorite for many, but I prefer the Nintendo port for solo play, since it has a better feel to it in terms of controls and on-screen action.

Since the Nintendo-published game is so much more common than the Tengen cartridge, it is the version most gamers identify with the NES console. Despite *Tetris* being ported to countless consoles, computers, and handheld devices, and despite spawning such sequels and offshoots as *Tetris Attack* (SNES), *Tetrisphere* (N64), and *Tetris Plus* (PlayStation), this version

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of *Tetris* is my all-time favorite and one of the few games that's actually gotten in the way of my being a healthy, well-rounded, productive citizen—truly the sign of a great game!

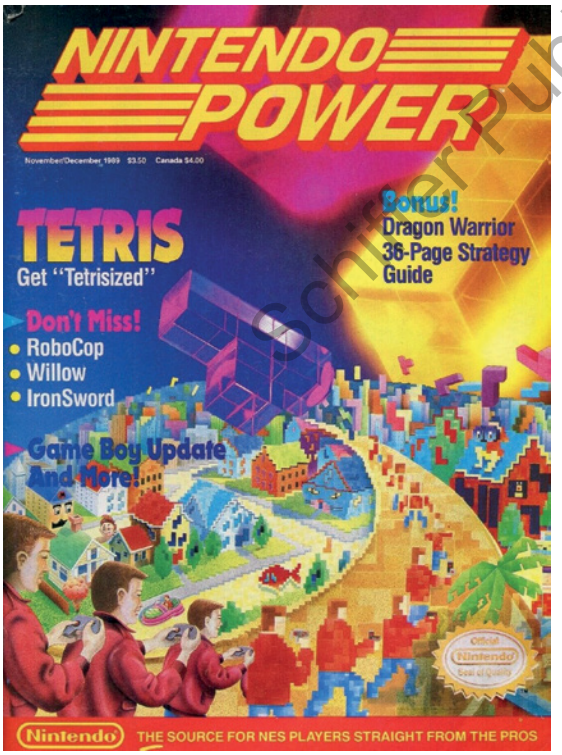
FUN FACT:

The Nintendo-published NES version of Tetris was featured prominently in the 1990 Nintendo World Championships competition.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Tetris is flawless. The perfect game. It is the king of action puzzles, inventing the "falling block" subgenre and inspiring such games as Columns, Dr. Mario, Klax, Puyo Puyo, Lumines, and far too many others to mention. And, despite countless versions for numerous consoles and computers, the Nintendo-published NES version is still my go-to port.

—Brett Weiss



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CHAPTER 88

THUNDER FORCE III

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: Technosoft
DEVELOPER: Technosoft
1 PLAYER
1990

As the Video Game Critic, reviewing games for various consoles from all eras, I take pride in experiencing the full range of genres, from platformers to sports to the occasional RPG. But after a long day of work, when the world has beaten me down, I tend to reach for . . . a beer—whoops, I mean a good 2-D shooter! This is gaming at its purest. No manuals needed, no tutorials or load screens—just man versus machine. The machine being your console. It's like the legendary John Henry challenging that steam-powered drilling machine back in the day (on second thought, nope, not really).

The original *Thunder Force* was an overhead shooter released in 1983 for several Japanese computers. Its sequel, *Thunder Force II*, was ported to the Genesis in 1989. It featured alternating overhead and side-scrolling stages. The overhead flying stages were . . . okay . . . but you could get lost in their mazelike designs. No, but really, they were fine. Okay, you win; maybe those overhead stages left a little something to be desired. The side-scrolling levels, however, were dynamite and really set the stage for an epic third chapter.

I was introduced to *Thunder Force III* in 1992, when my buddy Tuan, who lived down the street, brought the game over one Saturday for a typical afternoon of gaming. He had borrowed it from his uncle, yet Tuan assured me I could hold on to it for as long as I wanted. That was awfully nice of him . . . I guess. I liked the bright-red box with Phoenix birds lighting up the cover, but the game itself did not seem extraordinary. It followed the time-honored side-scrolling shooting formula, with colorful stages, a variety of weapons, and a rollicking musical score. Shooters such as *Gradius*, *Raiden*, and *R-Type* all followed the same formula.

Thunder Force III was definitely fun, but in those days I always figured something bigger and better was right around the corner. What I didn't realize was that with the advent of 3-D graphics and first-person shooters, 2-D shooters were to become a dying breed. Today, many regard *Thunder Force III* as one of the best games of its kind, but what makes it so special? In a word, balance. With many 2-D shooters you find yourself searching for a single, particularly powerful weapon, charging it up, and using that to cruise through the bulk of the game. *Thunder Force III* doesn't work that way.

Its weapons are extremely well balanced, each suited to a particular situation. The missiles that crawl along surfaces are perfect for caves, while the "wave" is ideal for wiping out an onslaught of enemies directly ahead. The back-and-front shot may seem lame, but it is useful in just about any situation. And while the hunter missiles never miss their targets, they are also the weakest weapon. And let's not forget about the awesome claw (a.k.a. "craw"), which will both protect your ship and augment its firepower.

Collecting icons puts multiple weapons at your disposal, allowing you to toggle between them on the fly. You'll switch to the one best suited to your current situation, only to lose it when you die. This levels the playing field, forcing you to make the best of what you have left. It's often a smart strategy to "save" a particular weapon for the boss. I appreciate how the game thoughtfully dispenses weapon icons. If you pick up the backshot, chances are that enemies are about to approach from the rear. Free ship icons are placed in precarious locations, providing a tantalizing risk-versus-reward dynamic.

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The selectable planets feature distinctive environments with constantly changing enemies and landscapes. There are no cookie-cutter sections or repeating waves of enemies in this game. There's always a weird new adversary up ahead, like a spore-spewing rose, a robotic squid, or a pair of wasps dropping off heat-seeking missiles. One stage has you fighting water currents, while the next has you avoiding shifting tectonic plates. The planet Gorgon features mesmerizing flames dancing in the background. Unlike many modern shooters, the bosses do not wear out their welcome. These mammoth creatures include a space dragon and twin robots, and who can forget G Lobster?

Technically, *Thunder Force III* was tailor made for the Genesis with its "blast processing" (a fiction created by Sega's marketing team to describe the console's speed) on full display. Swirling enemies, waves of projectiles, and shifting land masses can't slow this game down. There are times when the game is almost too fast. You can toggle between several ship speeds, and the fastest is nearly uncontrollable. Fortunately the collision detection is highly forgiving. I love how when you lose a ship the action continues without missing a beat. A game like this couldn't be duplicated on the Super Nintendo, although they did try with *Thunder Spirits*—a game marred by erratic slowdown.

You have to dig deep to find anything to complain about, but you could argue that *Thunder Force III* has its share of cheap hits. Some areas require a certain amount of memorization to get through. Geysers of lava shoot up in the fire world without warning. Likewise, when navigating shifting caverns, selecting the wrong passage might lead you into no-man's land. These sections are more the exception than the rule, however, and learning the patterns is part of the fun.

Perhaps the most timeless aspect of the game is its amazing soundtrack, which has the uncanny ability to instantly transport me back to the '90s. Each stage begins with a churning musical intro that perfectly segues into an upbeat melodic undertow that sucks the player in and won't let go. The pulsating music mirrors the game's edge-of-your-seat gameplay as you ride a sweet wave of swirling harmonics and undulating beats.

Thunder Force III represented the pinnacle of the side-scrolling shooter genre. Since it didn't rely on gimmicks such as scaling or 3-D graphics, it has aged like fine wine. Not even the Thunder Force series itself could live up to this game! Subsequent entries featured more-advanced graphics but failed to recapture the game's raw exuberance and exhilarating fun. I guess that's the downside of making a classic. *Thunder Force III* is one for the ages!

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FUN FACT:

Due to its success, Thunder Force III was ported to the arcades as Thunder Force AC (1990). It looked a lot like the Genesis / Mega Drive version, but it did borrow certain enemies and stages from Thunder Force II as well as introduce some new content.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The side-scrolling shooter genre is littered with tons of great games, from Defender to R-Type to Gaiares, to name just a few, and Thunder Force III is at or near the top of this long list in terms of fun, balance, and playability.

—Dave "the Video Game Critic" Mrozek, founder and chief writer for videogamecritic.com, publishing classic game reviews since 1999

CHAPTER 89

TOEJAM & EARL IN PANIC ON FUNKOTRON

SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER / ADVENTURE
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: JOHNSON VOORSANGER PRODUCTIONS
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

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As a young gamer and fan of the original *ToeJam & Earl*, I put the highly anticipated sequel on my Christmas list in 1993, and its arrival couldn't come fast enough. The visual style, animation, funky sound, and cheeky characters were the epitome of the Sega Genesis of the time. That is, it promised a fun and colorful adventure title that would be sure to keep any gamer busy playing and replaying for hours and hours, well after the winter snow melted and the holiday decorations were stored for another year. Powering up the game delivered on that expectation. It was my honor to unpack each present, scour each stage for secrets, rescue the famed funkopotumus, and listen to that funky-groove hip-hop as the opening cinematic introduced an urgent plea to rid Funkotron from Earthlings once and for all . . .

Presented as a direct successor to the original *ToeJam & Earl*, *Panic on Funkotron* takes place shortly after its predecessor, but it offers players some significant differences, including a shifted camera angle, innovative gameplay mechanics, a fun story, and a memorable visual style.

The game opens with a colorful story sequence that introduces the player to the planet Funkotron. An animated TV broadcast announces that a slew of Earthlings is suddenly running amok on the alien planet, causing all sorts of disturbances. Unfortunately for ToeJam and Earl, the broadcast also names the duo as the cause of this invasion. It seems that ToeJam & Earl, when returning to Funkotron from their previous adventure, inadvertently brought some stowaway Earthlings along too. It's up to the player to clean up the mess caused by these two lovable teenagers. Thus begins the player's journey; control ToeJam or Earl (or both during co-op mode), find all the Earthling invaders, catch them with handy trap-o-matic jars, and ship the Earthlings back to their home planet.

Panic on Funkotron is a side-scrolling platformer, which is a major departure from the original's three-quarter-view camera. Players must run and jump as they move from the start of the level to the end goal, collecting presents (a franchise staple) and interacting with local residents of Funkotron along the way. Levels are arranged into colorful locales, with each having a fixed number of Earthlings to discover and collect. In total there are 17 levels, with each named suitably for a game about funky aliens. Players are given their goal directly in the opening cinematic. Using the unlimited set of trap-o-matic jars, you should fire them at Earthlings to trap them safely. While some may take more hits to "trap," all Earthlings can cause damage to the player if left unhandled. If the player takes too much damage, they will lose a life. This goal becomes tougher, not only because of gameplay challenges but because Earthlings may scurry away if not caught quickly, only to hide in other parts of the level. This causes *Panic on Funkotron* to behave like an adventure title, frequently requiring players to revisit parts of a level in search of lost Earthlings and treasures. This is where *Panic on Funkotron* innovates, in the various ways it entertains the player along the way.

Exploration in this game is its own reward. Each level is filled with fun characters offering witty dialogue, as well as various minigames, bonus rooms, and the occasional trampoline-like fungus platforms on which players can enjoy the fun of flipping a three-legged alien over and over in the air before smashing down in an epic wipeout. Other notable distractions include Jam-Outs, which are a *Simon*-style pattern-repeating game, a timed bonus round called the Hyperfunk Zone, and even the Fungus Olympics, where players perform on fungus trampolines for maximum points. Perhaps the more tantalizing of the game's side quests is the search for the missing relics of Lamont, the funkopotumus. Collect all of these missing trinkets, and players just may unlock the best ending of the game. All of these elements work not just to bring funky identity to the environment, but to add tons of replay value to the game.

Visually, *Panic on Funkotron* features a bold, cartoonlike aesthetic. Each character packs tons of action animations, as well as fun idle animations that trigger when the characters are left untouched (which was popularized by Sega's primary champion brand *Sonic the Hedgehog*). The sound and music also stand out. Beyond the funky beats that underscore each level, *Panic on Funkotron* features digitized voice, an effect that brought charm to the original as well. While this title was composer John Baker's second game score, experiences on the first shine through on the second, including deeper theme tracks and instrumentation.

A contemporaneous review in the *Chicago Tribune* from writer Eugenia C. Daniel praised the Herbie Hancock–inspired soundtrack, as well as the family-friendly tone of the game. Further, Chip and Jonathan Carter of the *Washington Times* (March 1994) wrote, "This is one of the funniest games we've ever seen. The graphics are superb, and the action and control are flawless."

Even with a successful commercial launch, justified by a compelling visual style and catchy music, fans of the original game were quick to speak out against the differences in the sequel. In his "Funkotronics 101" article for IGN (www.ign.com), Travis Fahs wrote, "In the years following the release of *Panic and Funkatron*, the title has developed a negative reputation as a selling out of a daring design, and perhaps rightly so. Voorsanger and Johnson have both expressed many regrets about giving up their ideals to please marketing suits. . . . Without the shadow of the first game looming over it, however, *TJ&E*'s second adventure is a pretty exceptional game in its own right, and deserving of a second look."

Between the original title and *Panic on Funkotron*, ToeJam and Earl had some cameos on the Genesis, including in the light-gun game *Ready, Aim, Tomatoes*, which was part of the Menacer six-game cartridge. The success of *Panic on Funkotron* would solidify the leads among "SEGA's roster of second[-]tier mascots," wrote Chris Johnston of Gamespot (www.gamespot.com), placing the duo just below such gaming royalty as Sonic the Hedgehog.

Another *ToeJam & Earl* would follow, but not without delay caused by a failed launch of the Sega Saturn and canceled plans for a Dreamcast entry. Eventually *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth* released on the Xbox in 2002. The franchise received several rereleases, including digitally downloaded versions on the Wii Virtual Console in 2007, before making a full comeback with the multiplatform *ToeJam & Earl: Back in the Groove* in 2019.

Despite resistance from fans loyal to the original, *Panic on Funkotron* is an entertaining, innovative, and beautifully rendered adventure game that solidified its characters among the most unique and clever personalities on the platform.

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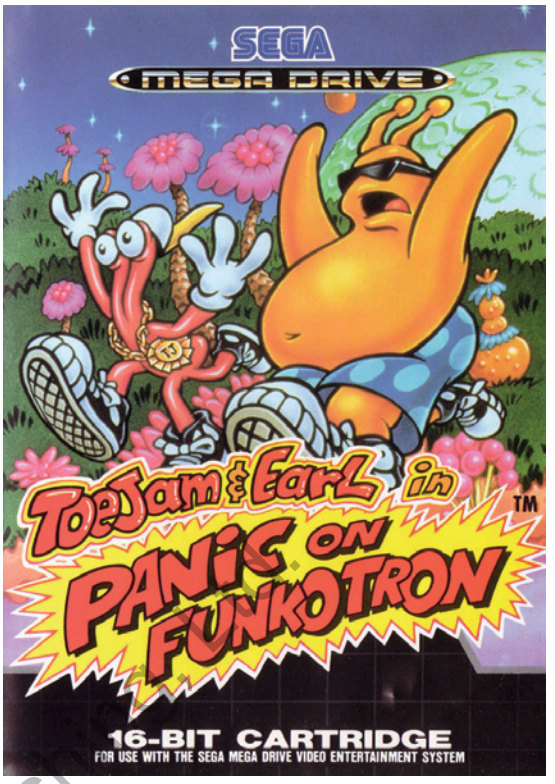
FUN FACT:

Initially the development company for Panic on Funkotron was known simply as Johnson Voorsanger Productions, or just "JVP," as they were credited in the game. After the success of the ToeJam & Earl games, the company was renamed ToeJam & Earl Productions, Inc.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The alien planet Funkotron is presented in incredible detail, with colorful sprites and backgrounds expertly illustrated and animated. It pushed the limited Genesis palette confidently and created a unique look that rivaled nearly everything on the system. The game also offered great gameplay.

—Matt Raithel, studio director, Graphite Lab; professor of practice of game design, Maryville University



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CHAPTER 90

TOMB RAIDER

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: ACTION/ADVENTURE
PUBLISHER: EIDOS INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: CORE DESIGN
1 PLAYER
1996

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As a game that became almost instantly iconic, *Tomb Raider*'s success retrospectively defies logic in some ways. At a time when CD-ROM-based games were heavily focused on fast-paced action, deep orchestra-quality rock tracks, linear gameplay, and traditionally beefy male protagonists, along came Core Design's *Tomb Raider*, a game predominantly known for its British female heroine who was adept at using her brains AND brawn.

I was in the midst of my college courses in 1996 when *Tomb Raider* launched for the PlayStation. I had very little money, so I found myself in a precarious position when I kept hearing how great the game was. All the cool kids were playing it. What to do . . . what to do . . . ? I decided to trade in my heavily used and beloved Atari Lynx handheld console to one of those mail order video game shops you would see in the pages of the major gaming magazines of the time. I had literally repainted it because the system's original paint had peeled off (yes, the first models were actually painted—another story for another time).

The trade-in company I shipped the Lynx to wasn't thrilled with the condition of the system. I suspect my paint job was rather off-putting. Nonetheless, they subsequently offered me 75% of the trade value they had originally quoted me. That was fine. It was just enough to parlay into nabbing a new copy of *Tomb Raider*, and that's all I cared about, so I pulled the trigger.

Weeks—yes, weeks; remember, this was the mid-'90s—went by as I patiently awaited the package. I came home from college one weekend and saw that my copy of *Tomb Raider* had finally arrived in the mail (along with a nasty note from the game store admonishing me once again for the condition in which my Lynx had been traded). I wasted no time and popped the game into my PlayStation.

Tomb Raider follows the adventures of Lara Croft, a treasure hunter for hire who embarks on a quest to find a priceless and powerful artifact at the request of Natla Technologies. Lara's journey takes you through the ancient and uncharted ruins, tombs, catacombs, labyrinths, and caverns of Peru, Egypt, and similar locales while you hunt for hidden treasures and confront various enemies. These enemies come in the form of human, animal, and "other" varieties, but perhaps the most treacherous opponent is that of the game's environment itself.

Packed to the brim with breathtaking heights that must be climbed, rickety bridges that must be traversed, underwater systems that must be swum, and traps that must be navigated, *Tomb Raider* is a constantly challenging and reflex-testing affair. Luckily, Lara has a respectable arsenal of weapons at her disposal. Sometimes conflict is unavoidable, but as a rule of thumb *Tomb Raider* rewards calm ingenuity over blazing guns when appropriate. *Tomb Raider* has numerous puzzle elements ranging in degrees of difficulty. The game is kind enough to provide minor hints, but you're on your own for the most part—I swear I was stuck in that damn Cistern level for the better part of a month!

Despite its relatively steep initial learning curve, it was an instant hit with me. It's not that *Tomb Raider* is necessarily difficult in the traditional sense, but the control scheme and responsiveness take getting used to. Jumping, for example, isn't completely straightforward. Hitting the jump button doesn't simply catapult Lara skyward in an instance like the 8-bit platformers we

knew and loved. Executing a jump has an ever-so-slight delay where the character animation initiates a fully realized human-jumping animation, complete with bending of the knees, extension, upward trajectory, and ground recovery. The process serves to foster a sense of realism about Lara—a sense of mass, impact, and life. After a few minutes of playing around with the controls, I found my new land legs with no problem.

And then there's the music, composed by Nathan McCree. In a departure from most other games of the time, *Tomb Raider* doesn't feature constantly running music tracks. Instead, it wisely drops in musical scores on cue when something specifically triggers an event. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the game is dead quiet. Most of what you hear throughout the game are the sounds you as the player generate. But that only serves to accentuate the emotional impact of those moments when the appropriate musical accompaniment does break the silence. For example, when you finally solve a puzzle and open a locked door, you hear a smooth, uplifting melody signifying your accomplishment. If you're being pursued by a pack of wolves, you'll experience something a bit more frantic and alarming.

Speaking of pursuits, another particularly awesome moment is your encounter with an absolutely massive (and fast!) *Tyrannosaurus rex*. One minute you're walking through a dimly lit valley while minding your own business, and suddenly this GIGANTIC dinosaur is trucking toward you! Pro tip: Don't stand and fight it! I learned this the hard way. By the way, via some spoiler I had inadvertently seen I actually KNEW in advance that this moment was going to happen, and it still scared the hell out of me!

Other fun moments include navigating a room with gigantic swords suspended from the ceiling, which tend to fall at inconvenient moments, such as meeting your skinless doppelganger, fighting the truly grotesque Abomination, and so on. Creative problem-solving, adaptation, and lots of trial and error are key to overcoming most of what *Tomb Raider* throws at you.

In its appearance, *Tomb Raider* looked comparatively good for its time, though I don't recall many gamers back then claiming it looked particularly great. Honestly, though, it didn't have to rely on mind-blowing graphics. The game looked the way it should, and seemed to lean more toward visual performance than painstaking visual detail. Everything about the original *Tomb Raider* is angular. I can't recall many smooth, rounded surfaces. The characters, the environment, and even the water itself—all very flatly polygonal and absent of texture. But this is what the PlayStation did, and it did it well. Even in the face of these minor visual drawbacks, *Tomb Raider* achieves an uncanny sense of realism and environmental immersion that most other games of the time could only dream of.

Tomb Raider would go on to sell more than seven million units worldwide across several gaming platforms. Lara Croft has since deservedly achieved A-list celebrity status in the world of video games among an increasing crowd of popular female characters, such as Ms. Pac-Man, Princess Peach, Samus Aran, Chun-Li, Bayonetta, Jill Valentine, and many more. But her popularity and cultural influence extend far beyond video games. Lara's impact has transcended the medium, and she has become a household name. With nearly 20 games in the franchise, *Tomb Raider* shows no signs of giving up

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the hunt anytime soon. In the quarter century since her first appearance, Lara's popularity is undeniable. You know you've hit the zenith of pop culture validity when you effectively spawn not one but two separate major motion picture franchises!

The *Tomb Raider* series remains alive and kicking, despite the series' dubious hit/miss ratio. Thankfully, though, the franchise's developers generally seem to learn from their mistakes and embrace the formulas that work. The franchise changed publishers in 2010 from Eidos Interactive to Square Enix, and gamers around the world have been given new reason to join Ms. Croft for some good, old-fashioned tomb raidin'!

Overall, *Tomb Raider* is a purely traditional adventure romp fashioned in the spirit of legendary globetrotting treasure hunters such as Indiana Jones and Allan Quatermain—a tried-and-true game that everyone should try at least once.

Just do me a favor and don't trade away your old, beat-up handhelds for a quick buck! It's not worth the hate mail.

FUN FACT:

Tomb Raider's development team, Core Design, consisted of only six team members and was created over a period of three years (1993 to 1996). That was an unusually scant team back in the mid-90's and is virtually inconceivable for a game of comparable scope by modern standards.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Tomb Raider arrived on the scene only a year after the original PlayStation's North American debut, yet it somehow managed to push the console's technical limitations to their limits. Tomb Raider was a technical and artistic tour de force that served as an example to other developers of what Sony's first console was capable of.

—Brian "CIVICMINDED" Lesyk, cohost of the Pass The Controller podcast

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CHAPTER 91

TRUXTON

SEGA GENESIS

GENRE: VERTICAL-SCROLLING SHOOTER

PUBLISHER: SEGA

DEVELOPER: TOAPLAN

1 PLAYER

1989

The Genesis is an excellent console for side-scrolling shooters, but it also have some great top-down vertical scrollers, including *Raiden Trad* and *Truxton*, which exude high quality and are among the best games of the genre. When deciding on the 100 games worthy of inclusion in this book, playing and replaying numerous titles, I knew I would include one or the other, but probably not both, since they are so similar. Ultimately I went with *Truxton* because it has better graphics, and simply because I play it more often.

As the game's story goes, an entire fleet of Gidan aliens are zooming toward Borogo, the planet you call home. The evil Gidans have already destroyed your planet's cargo bay in deep space and are now headed your way. As Tom the Bomb, brave patriot and ace pilot, you are Borogo's only hope. You must board your Super Fighter spacecraft, which is nothing less than the most powerful assault ship in the universe, and meet the alien attack head on.

You'll battle the mighty Gidans through five levels of play above eight different asteroids (Blue, Yellow, Red, Orchid, Purple, Poison, Galaxy Pool, and Magman), shooting alien creatures and ships with three types of weapons, each of a different color: Power Shots (red), which fire a fan of bullets; Truxton Beams (green), which look like a barrage of ultrapowerful arrowheads and are useful against large attackers; and Thunder Lasers (blue), which lock on to enemies and chase them down (similar to the plasma weapon in *Raiden II*). You begin the game with the three-way Power Shots, which are indeed pretty powerful—you'll never be stuck with a "pea shooter" in this game.

When you see a weapon icon floating around, you can fly over it to make it your current weapon. You can also fly over Power Booster icons, which will increase your weapon's strength. You begin at Power 1, where you can shoot in three directions with the Power Shots, or one beam or laser. If you grab five Boosters it takes you to Power 2, which lets you shoot in five directions, or three beams or lasers in succession. Grabbing 10 Boosters takes you to Power 3, which deploys support ships that fire a Rainbow Circle Shot around your ship to protect you on all sides at once, or that let you fire five beams or lasers in succession. It is an awesome feeling to be fully powered up in this game.

You can also grab Destroyer Bombs ("B" icons), which, when you fire them, project a huge skull on the playfield and damage every enemy in sight. Not only does this look supercool, and not only does it damage enemies, but it neutralizes enemy bullets and missiles. You should use the bombs judiciously, since they can get you out of a tight jam when you're surrounded on all sides by enemies and their projectiles, which happens fairly frequently, especially during level 5, a difficult section of the game to beat. Fortunately, power-ups and extra bombs appear frequently. The screen gets very busy at times, but without any noticeable slowdown.

Last, picking up Speed Boosters ("S" icons) increases your speed up until it has increased a maximum of five times your original velocity. After that you get bonus points for grabbing Speed Boosters. All these weapons and power-ups work beautifully together, helping make this a well-balanced shooter.

The ship you control is spry and nimble and handles extremely well—the controls are excellent. You battle an interesting, graphically impressive assortment of enemies (against nicely rendered backdrops), including alien spaceships, space rocks, assorted gun turrets, minibosses, huge bosses, and a variety of tanks and other ground-based enemies, some of which move on

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tracks. Certain enemy ships look like mechanized bugs, complete with eyes and tentacles, while others are more traditional in design. Certain enemy ships have feet and legs like robots, which is kind of odd, since you can't walk around in open space, but it makes for a nice visual. I also like that the skull theme from the bombs is carried over on certain enemy tanks. The bomb icons in your weapons reserve also have a skull design.

A nice port of the 1988 Toaplan coin-op game, which I never actually saw in the arcades back in the day, *Truxton* for the Genesis adds a welcome feature to the already fun formula. By holding down the C button you can unleash rapid fire, which shoots your weapon continuously and saves wear and tear on your thumb. This is the method I always use when I play. Button A is for single shots, while button B drops bombs. In the arcade game, your bombs and ships in reserve are positioned along the bottom of the screen. In the Genesis version they are situated to the right of the playfield. The bombs in both versions of the game unleash heavy damage on enemies, but the bombs in the Genesis rendition cover a larger portion of the playfield. Another difference is that the Thunder Lasers always hold a lock on enemies in the Genesis port—they tend to lose their lock in the arcade game.

Nick Zverloff, writing for www.hardcoregaming101.net, points out some other differences between the Genesis game and the original: "The visuals only inhabit about ¾ of the screen, with the rest being taken up by a black status bar. It's a bit easier than the arcade version and it's mostly faithful, though the fully powered up red weapon has been changed from a 15-bullet shot to a 9-bullet shot, with an added barrier that can absorb collisions with enemies but not bullets. There are five different endings in the Genesis version, one for each of the five loops; a nice bonus considering the arcade version didn't have any endings at all, it just restarted on the next loop. Amusingly, the music in this version plays at a faster speed than the arcade or PC Engine versions. This is because the developers only obtained the Mega Drive sound specifications a mere two weeks before release, so the tunes were erroneously developed under PAL specifications. Therefore, when played in a Japanese or American NTSC system, the music is sped up by 120%."

As with several other games in this book, I bought my complete, mint-in-box copy of *Truxton* from FuncoLand during the late 1990s, when Genesis games were super cheap. I paid just $2.99. I had read in some gaming magazine that *Truxton* was a top-quality shooter, and I certainly wasn't disappointed, especially for the price. The sound effects aren't terribly impressive, but the music is solid, and the shooting action is absolutely fantastic. I still pull this game off the shelf from time to time to have some good, old-school, hard-core fun. If you like *Tiger-Heli* and *Twin Cobra* you'll love *Truxton*. A sequel, *Truxton II*, followed in the arcades in 1992. Unfortunately it wasn't ported to the Genesis.

FUN FACT:

The Japanese version of Truxton is called Tatsujin, which means "expert" or "master."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Truxton is a fine port of an excellent arcade game. It's challenging without being frustrating and features cool enemies, awesome power-ups, and stellar shooting action. It's definitely one of the better games of its type, even though it was released early in the life of the Genesis.

—Brett Weiss

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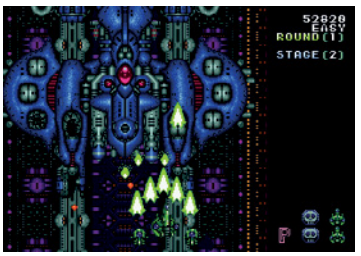

CHAPTER 92

TWISTED METAL 2

PLAYSTATION
GENRE: DEMOLITION / COMBAT RACING
PUBLISHER: SONY / 989 STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: SONY/SINGLETRAC
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1996

Released hot on the heels of the introduction of the smash hit PlayStation console, the original *Twisted Metal* introduced fans of 3-D gaming—which was a relatively new sensation at the time—to a different type of racer. *Twisted Metal* took the ideas of games such as *Destruction Derby* and armed them to the teeth. It was death-match-style action that was dark, highly engaging, and, of course, twisted.

While the franchise never varied too far from its familiar formula, *Twisted Metal 2* is the pinnacle of the series. According to the story line, it's been one year since the first Twisted Metal tournament ravaged Los Angeles, and Calypso wonders where he will hold the next tournament. With 14 drivers (12 playable) ready to roll, Calypso decides to host a world tour for the new combatants. The drivers must face off across eight locations from around the globe, with a solitary goal in mind: win the Twisted Metal tournament and gain the ultimate favor of Calypso, who will grant them the prize of their choice.

Seven cars return, though some of their drivers are different. Series favorites such as Mr. Grimm, Hammerhead, and Spectre return for more carnage. Five new drivers arrive to take on the destruction of the tournament. The new characters bring their own special moves and style to the game. Grasshopper's special move will send the small car into the air, allowing it to crash back down on a target with deadly force. Mr. Slam, a bulldozer, will pick up your car and slam it into the ground, taking substantial life from your health bar. The game's central character this time around is Axel, a man locked in place between two monster truck tires with nothing to protect him. According to the story line, he had been locked in place for 20 years and sought out Calypso to free him from his mobile prison.

Notably missing from the playable cars is fan favorite Sweet Tooth. This is because he was declared the winner of the first Twisted Metal tournament. You will face off against Sweet Tooth's new form in Dark Tooth as the boss at the end of the game. The final boss from *Twisted Metal*, Minion, who is a large, fast-moving tank, also returns as a midboss. You can unlock both Sweet Tooth and Minion to play by using a code, but Dark Tooth is unplayable. This marks the first of two instances that the franchise's mascot character—Sweet Tooth—was not immediately available to play. The second would be in *Twisted Metal 4*, where you also had to use a code to unlock him.

While contemporaneous reviews for *Twisted Metal 2* were positive overall, there was a common complaint. Many reviewers found the game too similar to the first *Twisted Metal*, both graphically and in terms of gameplay. This is a reasonable assessment, but since the gameplay was already great, changing it too much could have ruined it. There was enough added to the game between the new characters and levels to keep the action interesting for most fans of the franchise.

The differences were certainly more than adequate for the folks at Digital Trends (www.digitaltrends.com). In January 2021, the site hailed *Twisted Metal 2* as one of the best PlayStation games of all time, saying, "The sequel expanded everything about it, throwing in more vehicles, more arenas, and more custom and multiplayer modes for just dropping in and enjoying the mayhem à la carte."

One cool addition to the formula is the lightning

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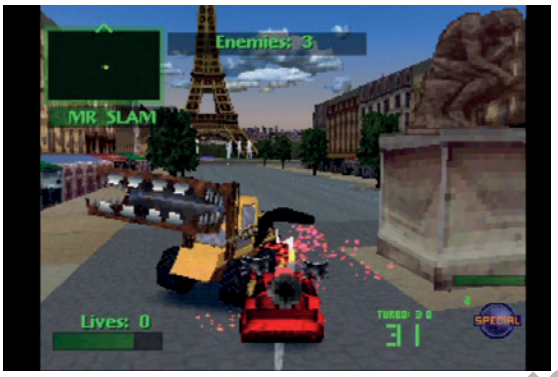

weapon. While dodging combatants and picking up resources to use against them, you will occasionally find a lightning icon, which is specific to certain levels (Los Angeles, Moscow, and Hong Kong) and allows you to lure your enemies to a lightning rod that will dispense bolts of electricity to anyone around it. This works as a double-edged sword, since if you are too close to it when it goes off, you will also take damage, so stay clear!

The driving controls for *Twisted Metal 2* are solid for the pre-analog stick era of the PlayStation. The directional pad controls the car. Square accelerates, while triangle activates the turbo boosters. X is for braking. When X and square are pressed together, your car will make a tight turn, enabling you to U-turn and face your pursuing attacker. L2 fires your currently active special weapon, while R2 uses your stock machine guns. L1 and R1 scroll through your stored special weapons. Each car has its own unique special attack that will regenerate after being used. The maps have random missile types, bombs, napalm, and other such weapons that you can pick up and employ against the other cars. New to *Twisted Metal 2* are level attacks that will attack all cars in a specific section of the map.

Two-player versus combat returned, allowing players to go head to head or against the computer with the new drivers and levels. New to the formula is two-player cooperative play. You and a friend are given six lives to share and must make your way through the tournament in split-screen combat. You progress through the levels until either you lose all of your lives or you face off against Dark Tooth. The tournament mode's difficulty doesn't increase with the addition of a second player as one would expect. As such, the mode becomes easier due to the two players for the enemy AI to split its focus on.

In an interview on the first *PlayStation Underground* demo disk, *Twisted Metal 1* and *2* director David Jaffe was asked if *Twisted Metal 2* was "everything he wanted."

"The first one wasn't," he said. "The first one is very much . . . we always compare it to like a garage band version of what ultimately the game ended up being, and that was *Twisted Metal 2*. The first one had all the heart that we wanted it to have, but it lacked a lot in terms of presentation and gameplay, things like that. It wasn't until the second one that we were really able to make the game everything we had originally intended to make."

When asked how *Twisted Metal 2* is different from *Twisted Metal*, Jaffe said, "I'd have to say the gameplay. There are a lot of things in *Twisted 2* that I am real proud of. I think everyone involved with the product really put in to it and should be proud of it. The most important thing . . . is just the jump in gameplay from one and two . . . especially when you are competing with a friend and you are fighting with a friend, it's such a richer experience. There is so much more strategy, so much more depth to what you can do, that I think that's the thing I am proudest of. That we were able to learn what it takes to get that gameplay and figure out how to execute it."

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The passion behind the game was apparent to anyone who played *Twisted Metal 2*. The pacing is erratic, and the stages will leave you either struggling to survive in the open environments or allow you to find creative hiding places to plan your next move, though time is always against you the longer you wait. The enemies will scour the map, looking for you, and will not hesitate to fire on you if you are found idle. What could be more fun than that?

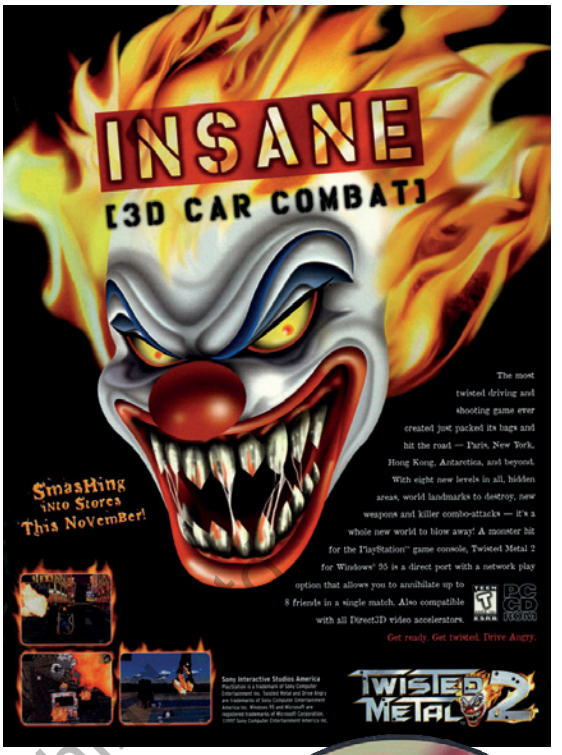
FUN FACT:

While Sony Computer Entertainment (SCEA) published the game's initial run, 989 Studios (a subsidiary of Sony Computer Entertainment) was added as publisher to the Greatest Hits rerelease. This was due to 989 taking over publishing as well as development of the Twisted Metal franchise from SingleTrac. Members of SingleTrac would return to the franchise with their new studio (Incognito Entertainment) to develop Twisted Metal Black for PlayStation 2.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

With creative cars, cool weapons, and a pace that doesn't stop until the last car stands dented and victorious, Twisted Metal 2 will have you white-knuckling your controller as you blast your way to the top of the heap, whether it's your first go at the game or your 100th.

—Zoe Howard, cocreator of Retro Gamer Girls, author of November's End and The Hunters Realm



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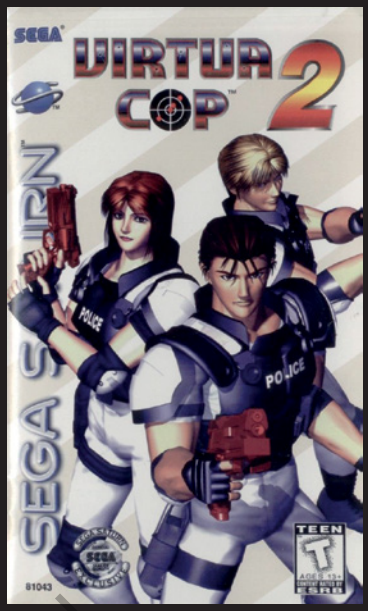
CHAPTER 93

VIRTUA COP 2



SEGA SATURN
GENRE: LIGHT-GUN SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2 STUDIO
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1996

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I've been playing light-gun games since 1976, when I first pulled the trigger on Nintendo's full-motion-video, 16 mm, film-based game *Sky Hawk*. Prior to that, I knocked down countless targets at miscellaneous shooting galleries housed within carnivals or at various midways. While the technology has changed over the years, the basics of a light-gun shooter haven't strayed much from its roots. That's not to say that the Virtua Cop series didn't bring a lot to the table. The original *Virtua Cop* was the first to introduce 3-D polygons to the shooter genre and ultimately became a major influence on others, including the likes of the Time Crisis series and several *Resident Evil* spin-offs, as well as Sega's own *The House of the Dead* titles.

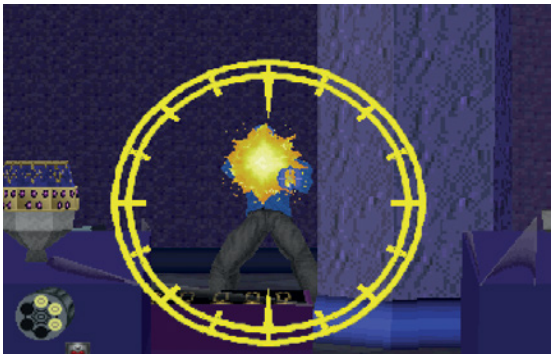
As the number in the title implies, *Virtua Cop 2* is obviously a sequel. Sega took all the hallmarks that made its predecessor a sensation and upped the ante. Simply stated, *Virtua Cop 2* provides more of everything—more polygons, more textures, more stages of play, more screen time, more enemies to target, and, more importantly, more weapons to target them with!

Virtua Cop 2 was a big success in the arcades in 1995 and became a welcome addition to the Sega Saturn library when it launched for the home market the following year. Sega was no stranger to light-gun shooters, since it was an arcade pioneer, releasing the pistol shooter *Balloon Gun* in 1974. Sega's home presence included the Light Phaser for the Master System, followed by the Menacer peripheral for the Genesis.

Sega released the Stunner light gun for the Saturn console. While the Stunner could be used with other titles, it was primarily made for *Virtua Cop 2*, and they were even packaged together in some iterations of the game's release. While *Virtua Cop 2* can also be played with the standard controller, it is not as much fun as pointing the Stunner toward the TV screen and blasting away. While not as exciting, playing with the Sega Saturn mouse provides the most-accurate means of obtaining top scores.

In the game, players choose from either of the two heroes from the first installment: James "Smarty" Cool or Michael "Hardy" Rage. In addition, a new protagonist by the name of Janet Marshall has been added to the mix. This on-rail shooter takes you on a fast and furious ride battling E.V.I.L. Incorporated, all while trying to serve and protect Virtua City. While the game does channel you along predetermined paths, the addition of selectable branching levels grants you limited control, offering some welcome variety. Playing through the game a second time will change up the enemy placement, adding much value when replayed. As in most games in the genre, players must shoot enemies before being shot by the hostiles themselves. It isn't easy, since your opposition is armed to the teeth with an assortment of handguns, knives, axes, grenades, and other implements of destruction.

Unique to *Virtua Cop 2*, the antagonists move realistically when shot. Hit a gangster in his shoulder and he will grasp it with his opposite hand while wincing in pain. Target the hand and he'll drop the weapon; shoot the leg and he'll limp or crawl away, dragging the injured limb behind. Be careful to make sure that innocent bystanders and hostages don't become victims! Shooting



on-screen power-ups adds additional weapons, including a magnum, an automatic, a shotgun, or a machine gun, to your arsenal. Oddly, the rifle from its arcade counterpart has been dropped. The game is broken up into "Police Files," requiring a varying amount of skill to complete. The BIG CHASE, the easiest of the three primary acts, consists of a jewelry store heist followed by a hot-pursuit car chase. SAVE THE MAYOR ramps up the difficulty and places you aboard a cruise ship to foil a high-profile kidnapping from airborne oppressors using jet-propelled packs. The third, and hardest, installment, eerily resembles the 1995 Tokyo subway attack where the Aum Shinrikyo cult group released sarin gas on three lines of the Tokyo Metro during rush hour, killing 14 people and injuring 5,500 others. That level hits a little too close to home. . . . All three primary missions end with a boss battle, and upon completion of them all, a brief STOP THE AIRSHIP BOMB police file concludes the game. While four levels may seem like a low number, they are relatively long and involved and, combined, will easily keep players involved for half an hour or more, which is good for this type of game. While the Saturn port of *Virtua Cop 2* is mighty close to the arcade experience, those truly familiar with the game's subtleties will recognize that the home version runs at a slightly slower pace, although it is notably faster paced than the first game.

FUN FACT:

Few know that GoldenEye 007 for the N64 was originally envisioned as an on-rails light-gun shooter and not a first-person shooter. Martin Hollis, GoldenEye's game designer, stated, "We ended up with innovative gameplay, in part because we had Virtua Cop features in a FPS: a gun that holds only seven bullets and a reload button, lots of position-dependent-hit animations, innocents you shouldn't kill, and an aiming mode. When you press R in GoldenEye the game basically switches to a Virtua Cop mode."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

While an amazing game with its own merits, Virtua Cop 2 was arguably the most accurate arcade port on a system known to have an excess of such excellent coin-op conversions. Another blockbuster developed by Yu Suzuki and Sega AM2! Solid through and through and complete with cheesy voice-overs—what's not to like?

—Michael Thomasson, historian, educator, publisher, record holder, and all-around good guy

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CHAPTER 94

VIRTUA FIGHTER

SEGA SATURN
GENRE: FIGHTING
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2 STUDIO
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1995

I first laid eyes on *Virtua Fighter* in December '93 in the Oglethorpe Mall in Savannah, Georgia. I was a graduate student at Savannah College of Art & Design and was working on my master's degree in animation. At the time I was learning classical animation and 2-D computer animation on Amiga 500 computers, and the college was one of three educational facilities in North America that had high-end, state-of-the-art Silicon Graphics (SGI) computers capable of rendering 3-D animation. Needless to say, my jaw dropped to the floor when I turned the corner in the Gold Mine Arcade and saw Pai Chan crescent-kick Jacky to the ground in all of its flat-shaded polygon goodness! I was literally speechless, seeing a coin-op machine crunching the numbers that previously only a half-million-dollar SGI could perform—and at 30 frames per second! The *Virtua Fighter* arcade game, which was Sega's answer to Capcom's super-popular *Street Fighter II*, ran on the Sega's Model 1 system board. It was developed in collaboration with Lockheed Martin, which is an American aerospace, arms, defense, and security company—so there was a lot of muscle behind it.

Ironically, technological *limitations* played a big role in the direction of the game. In an interview published on virtuafighter.com, *Virtua Fighter* director and producer Yu Suzuki said, "To be perfectly honest, I really wanted to do a soccer or rugby game next, but being team sports there were just too many characters to animate and we simply didn't have the computing power to make it work. Eventually it boiled down to a question of what we could do with only two characters on screen, which left us with boxing or another martial art."

While truly an expensive cabinet at the time, the $5,000 *Virtua Fighter* coin-op is equivalent to just under $10,000 when adjusted for inflation in the modern day. Still a far cry from the SGI's price tag, and definitely pushing more polygons than the standard PC of the day could ever dream of calculating! Gordon Moore, cofounder of both Fairchild Semiconductor and Intel, once stated that computer capability doubles in power while production of scale drives the price of such technology down. His forecast has since become known as "Moore's law" and was certainly in play when the 3-D technology leapt from supercomputers such as the SGI to high-end, custom-made coin-ops by Sega.

The home port of *Virtua Fighter* for the Saturn, which came out in Japan in 1994 and hit North America in 1995, was released only a year after the groundbreaking title premiered in the arcade. It was truly an incredible achievement! The attach rate of the game nearly matched console sales at launch in Japan, and *Next Generation Magazine* declared that "the Saturn *Virtua Fighter* is, to all intents and purposes, the coin-op game brought home." Keeping in line with Moore's law, the Saturn launched in the US at only $400 and included *Virtua Fighter* as the pack-in title. While the game was certainly rushed to meet the Saturn's Japanese debut, it is very faithful to its arcade big brother. Unless viewed under close scrutiny, most players would not realize that the camera view was panned back slightly and that it was running at a lower frame rate, closer to 20 frames per second. There was some occasional screen flicker and polygon tearing from time to time, but considering how groundbreaking its arcade counterpart truly was, the Saturn release was nothing short of a technological

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miracle and a real showpiece for Sega's new console. And with the home version being released on CD-ROM, the soundtrack was actually superior to its arcade counterpart. Like its arcade predecessor, the home version of *Virtua Fighter* pits eight fighters from around the globe in the tournament of all tournaments. Each character is armed with a distinctive real-world fighting style, making for a full arsenal of signature moves performed with the d-pad (joystick in the arcade) combined with kick, punch, and guard buttons. The best-of-three match offers three paths to victory: deplete the enemy's energy bar through a series of combative blows, push the adversary out of the ring, or simply have more health remaining when the timer expires. When the protagonist defeats all the opponents, a final round against the ultimate villain, Dural, ensues.

While *Virtua Fighter* was the first arcade fighting game to feature 3-D polygon graphics and created lifelike moves with fluid motion that would not have been possible with traditional flat sprite graphics, PlayStation's *Battle Arena Toshinden* raised the bar. The gameplay wasn't as sophisticated as *Virtua Fighter's* fighting engine, but it was visually more enchanting. In response, Sega published *Virtua Fighter Remix*. The new build boasted a higher polygon count that was further upgraded substantially by being texture-mapped. Better yet, Sega mailed all the registered Saturn owners the new edition free of charge. The Sega Saturn was underpowered in comparison to the PlayStation, but *Virtua Fighter*'s immense popularity allowed Sega to fight the good fight (so to speak) and compete against a much-stronger competitor. When you think about it, isn't that what fighting games are all about?

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FUN FACT:

If Sega had not made Virtua Fighter, the modern video game landscape might have turned out completely different. When Sony first started developing the original PlayStation, it was 2-D based and not 3-D focused. After Sony Computer Entertainment producer Ryoji Akagawa and chairman Shigeo Maruyama witnessed the grand success of Sega's premier 3-D fighter, they changed the direction of the platform—and gaming—FOREVER!

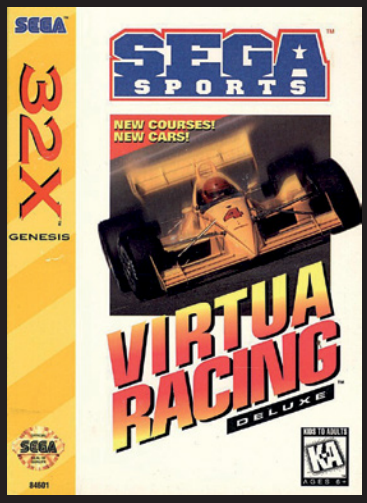
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Virtua Fighter was yet another revolutionary contribution by famed game designer Yu Suzuki, and arguably his best. That is saying a lot, considering he engineered more than 50 titles, including such hits as Space Harrier, Out Run, After Burner, and Shenmue. Virtua Fighter was exceedingly influential in the growth of the fighting genre and video games as a whole.

—Michael Thomasson, historian, educator, publisher, record holder, and all-around good guy

CHAPTER 95

VIRTUA RACING DELUXE



SEGA 32X
GENRE: FORMULA-1/INDY RACING
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1994

The 32X add-on device for the Genesis lives in infamy as Sega's first big home video game failure, since many gamers held off for the more advanced Sega Saturn console, which was to be released the following year. For those of us who were unaware of the Saturn, the 32X was an interesting idea that could help the Sega Genesis compete with the power of the Super Nintendo. In many ways it did just that, even though it was a mere peripheral and not a true new console. *Virtua Racing Deluxe* was one of those games that showed just how well the machine could have performed in the marketplace, had the 16-bit market not been on its way out.

My family received the Sega 32X for Christmas in 1994, the year it was released. I vividly remember my parents asking us if it were something we thought everyone in the house would enjoy. We of course never said no to any new video game, and come Christmas Day, it was under the tree with three games. *DOOM* and *Virtua Racing Deluxe* sat there eager to be opened, while *Star Wars Arcade* was packed in with the 32X.

We made quick work of opening our presents, since we were excited to try out the new device. We brought our Genesis into the living room, plugged in the 32X, and booted it up. While *DOOM* and *Star Wars Arcade* were fair ports of their big brothers, we sat in amazement at the quality of *Virtua Racing Deluxe*. It wasn't exactly like the arcade game, but it was superior visually to what Nintendo had done with *Star Fox*, the company's stab at a 3-D polygonal game released for the Super Nintendo the previous year. While Nintendo's Super FX chip gave *Star Fox* an advantage regarding polygonal graphics, *Star Fox* suffered massive slowdown with its variable frames per second. *Virtua Racing Deluxe* held a steady 20 frames per second and looked and played better for it.

Once you select your car and track, you enter the race. The timer begins as the red lights switch to green. The roads twist and turn, requiring almost constant steering as you push to avoid the walls and other racers. Your opponents move ahead of you as you gain speed to try to overtake them. The sound of your opponents as you slip past them heightens your anticipation for completing the race, one hopes in first place. The fear of knowing that if you crash you will lose precious time is excruciating but adds to the fun. The moment of truth comes as your car crosses the final flag, and claiming your victory never gets old. If you complete the race successfully, you get a medal, and your blood pumps with anticipation for what the next stage will hold.

While the Sega Genesis port of *Virtua Racing* was a decent rendition of the arcade game, the 32X version cleaned up many of the limitations of Sega's 16-bit hardware. The 32X cartridge included all the previous content of the arcade and the Genesis but added two new car types (for a total of three) and two new tracks (for a total of five). Unlike the Genesis version, it featured automatic transmission for those who didn't want to bother with shifting gears.

In addition to the main game, where you race through the five stages, *Virtua Racing Deluxe* includes Time Attack, letting you race against the clock with no opponents. In the 2Players VS mode you can challenge a friend to a race of five, ten, fifteen, or twenty laps.

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One of the biggest draws to the 32X game was the aforementioned inclusion of two new cars. You could race as the classic formula car to your heart's content, just like any version of the game, but the stock car and prototype were added to give gamers new challenges. The stock car had less thrust holding it to the ground, making it harder to control by design. The prototype's emphasis on power and speed makes it the hardest of the three cars to control. The programmers essentially used the new cars as difficulty levels, and it was an effective approach. If you wanted more of a challenge, or you were just tired of the formula car, the additional cars spiced things up quite nicely. Speaking of challenge, if you take too much damage during a race, you can head to the pits for repairs as you reach them on the courses. As with most racing games, this will cost you time and probably your position in the race as well.

Of the versions on the home market at the time, there was no reason—other than perhaps price point—to purchase the standard Genesis port if you had the 32X. Sure, the Sega Genesis version had its own VR chip built into the game, making it look decent on the console, but with the resolution of 256 × 240, it was a pale comparison to the 32X's 320 × 240. The revised game was cleaner and far less pixilated than its 16-bit counterpart. The 32X also ran the game on a fixed 20 frames per second as opposed to the 15 fps of the Genesis version.

The Sega Saturn port of *Virtua Racing Deluxe* hit stores less than a year after the 32X game, bringing into question "Shouldn't newer be better?" In some ways one could say the Saturn port was indeed superior. The Saturn obviously had more power than the 32X, and the disc had way more storage than the antiquated cartridge. The Saturn had what could be considered upgrades to the game, but the core was not as solid. The cars were floatier than the 32X or even Genesis version, making the basic game harder than it needed to be.

While the 32X was a disaster for Sega in the marketplace, there is a small selection of games that are considered must-owns for the console. *Virtua Racing Deluxe* typically places high among best-of lists for the Saturn, as do such titles as *Space Harrier*, *Knuckles Chaotix*, and *Virtua Fighter*.

IGN (ign.com) published a review of *VRD* 14 years after its release, praising it for its impressive 3-D graphics and near-arcade-like experience. In the final verdict, writer Levi Buchanan stated, "If you are starting a 32X collection, *Virtua Racing Deluxe* should be one of your first three 'gets.'"

Virtua Racing Deluxe is easily one of the best 32X games. That's not saying much, given the spotty and brief record of the peripheral, but it's a great racer in any company.

FUN FACT:

On the Japanese website Game Watch (game.watch.impress.co.jp), Naoki Horii, head of the M2 development company, stated that Virtua Racing Deluxe was to be rebuilt on the Nintendo 3DS, utilizing the 3-D capabilities of the system, but the game was scrapped when Sega canceled the Sega Classics line.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Virtua Racing Deluxe stands out among its peers due to its fidelity to the coin-op classic. With tight controls and a competent build, the game has stood the test of time, playing better than every console port before and after. The inclusion of the new cars and courses was especially cool. Even the 2019 Nintendo Switch release failed to capture the charm of the classic racer, proving one last time that "Sega does what Nintendon't."

—Zoe Howard, cocreator of Retro Gamer Girls, author of November's End and The Hunters Realm

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CHAPTER 96

WAVE RACE 64

NINTENDO 64
GENRE: WATERCRAFT RACING
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1996

I played *Wave Race 64* only because there was not much else available for the legendary Nintendo 64 console at the time of release. After plowing through *Super Mario 64*, and doing a quick look (and quick pass) at *Pilotwings 64*, *Wave Race 64* was literally the only other option. So, with a few bucks and a Blockbuster rental card, I took home *Wave Race 64* to give it a shot.

The water racer became one of my most played games on the console because of its simple surface design, yet advanced technological underpinnings. It had tons of features: great visuals, competitive multiplayer, and a variety of tracks, modes, and even tricks! Keep in mind, *Wave Race 64*'s trick-based gameplay predates other popular games in the trick-racing subgenre by several years. *Tony Hawk* wouldn't land on PlayStation until 1999, and the *SSX* franchise was even further away, releasing in 2000. Sure, I may have started in on *Wave Race 64* because of a lack of options, but to this day it still calls me back to the water with great gameplay, well-tuned design, and the nagging feeling that I could get even *higher* trick scores if I could just nail that darn triple flip . . .

Wave Race 64 was developed by Nintendo EAD and released for the Nintendo 64 in 1996. Perhaps less known is that *Wave Race 64* positions itself as a sequel of sorts to the 1992 Game Boy release *Wave Race*. *Wave Race 64* offers players a massive evolution of gameplay, including innovative physics-driven gameplay and bold visual style befitting a cutting-edge console.

Wave Race 64 opens with an ESPN-like intro sequence complete with dazzling camera flybys and quick-action cuts set against an energetic soundtrack. Not much in the way of story is needed to get the point across. You take control of one of the four available racers: R. Hayami, D. Mariner, A. Stewart, or M. Jeter. Each racer carries different core statistics, which may favor top speed, acceleration, handling, and so forth. This balance is commonly compared to another classic Nintendo EAD–developed racing title, *F-Zero*. In fact, *Wave Race 64* carried the description of "*F-Zero* on water" when initially conceived. However, the decision to evolve the game in key ways would help it stand out as an innovative Nintendo classic.

Wave Race 64 presents as a third-person racing game like many others in the genre. In the Championship mode, players control manned Jet Skis as they race laps around various aquatic courses trying to outpace the other racers. As they race, players must navigate around red and yellow buoys in slalom fashion to build their Jet Ski power. Fail to pass a buoy on the proper side, and power will decrease. Fail enough and the player will be forced to withdraw from the race. Time Trial mode operates in the same way, yet other racers are removed while the goal of getting the fastest time remains. Stunt mode adds the goal of earning top points by completing tricks and passing through rings during play. The eight courses range from the simple loop track of Sunny Beach to the complex Southern Island, featuring changing water levels as you race. An additional course called Dolphin Park is an open practice ground for new racers and stunt performers alike.

Development on *Wave Race 64* began with speedboats as the drivable watercraft—not jet skis. These speedboats were intended to transform to adapt to different types of play, yet they gave way to a more maneuverable craft for the final release. According to an article in the

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October 1996 issue of *Nintendo Power*, producer Shigeru Miyamoto compliments the initial design, yet also the desire for a more maneuverable craft. "Boats looked pretty good at the [Nintendo Shoshinkai] show, but I didn't think that *Wave Race 64* would be unique from similar games on other systems if we used boats," he said. "Jet skis can show many maneuvers that work well in the realistic water of *Wave Race 64*."

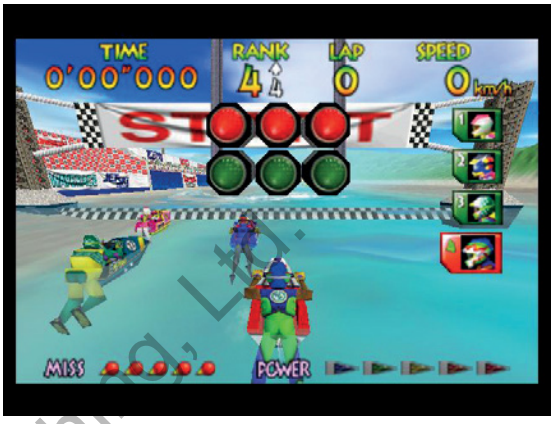
The decision would prove a smart one and yielded not only the new watercraft but also the exposure of the player's racer. This offered more options for tricks and stunts. For example, quickly pressing down–up + A will cause the racer to perform a handstand on the handlebars of the ski. Performing these maneuvers gives players a power boost, a score boost, and an ego boost, for sure. That is, of course, if you land the trick. Failed trick attempts may result in a wipeout, which is rewarded only by the racer being gleefully whipped from their craft. With the right button combos, players can also perform backflips, ride backward, and dive their craft underwater. The last can even be used to find shortcuts in certain courses and conditions.

Bold, vibrant, and flashy, the game has the appearance of a sports broadcast on a national network, complete with dramatic camera sweeps and edits. Built on an impressive physical simulation, *Wave Race 64* offers undulating waves, rising and falling sea levels, and an environmental atmosphere that wasn't seen in other games of the time. As an example, the player's first lap on the Drake Lake course suffers from dense fog and poor visibility, but as play continues, the fog will lift, revealing other pathways through the course.

Similarly, the Marine Fortress course becomes much shorter if the player uses the waves to leap over a retaining wall or takes a shortcut through a lift gate entrance that opens on lap 2. These conditional elements make the courses appear organic and realistic. The water rendering may be the most impressive visual feat, as IGN's Doug Perry noted in a 1996 post: "The way in which jet skis cut into the ocean's surface, lift off ramps, bounce into and off oncoming waves, or slide on icy surfaces is not only believable and engaging, but simply unparalleled . . . graphic highlights are abundant, ranging from the crystal clear water or heavy fog in Drake Lake, to the bright glare and reflections of Sunset Bay, to the glimmering night lights in Twilight City."

The sound design is equally compelling. Composer Kazumi Totaka carried a scattered résumé of titles for Nintendo, such as composer credits on *Mario Paint* and *Link's Awakening* prior to serving as composer on *Wave Race 64*. The balance between poppy commercial accompaniment and atmospheric ambience is well struck and serves as foreshadowing to Totaka's future contributions to games such as *Wii Sports*, and to the Wii Shop Channel.

In 2014, Jonti Davies of the All Game Guide (formerly at www.allgame.com) wrote that the game's "cheesy" and "distinctly '80s theme" soundtrack combined with the announcer's "hyperexcited cries"



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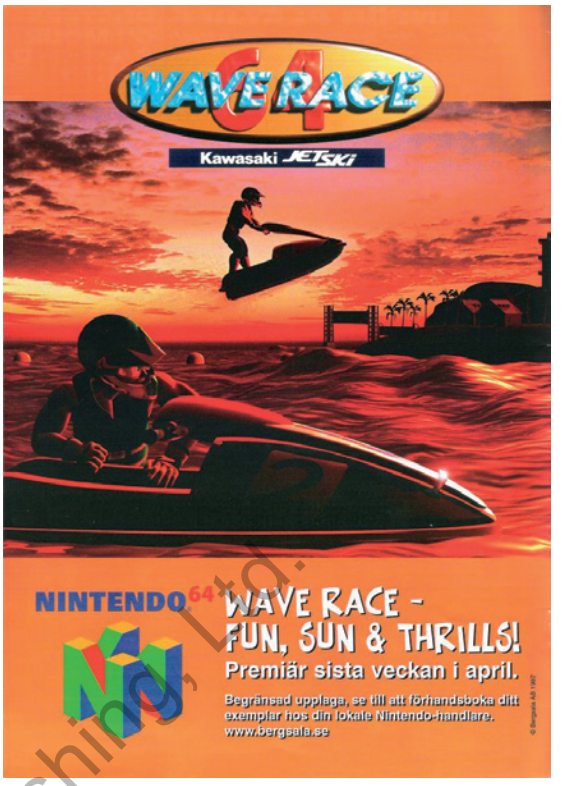
gives the game a light arcade feel. This could be considered a form of endorsement, since *Wave Race 64* doesn't attempt to share anything other than lighthearted, arcade-like fun.

Wave Race 64 earned nearly universally positive accolades from gaming press of the time, including glowing reviews from such sources as *Game Informer*, *Edge*, and GameSpot. Writer Glenn Rubenstein cited in a *Wave Race 64* review for GameSpot (www.gamespot.com) that the game features "the best use yet" of the Nintendo 64's controversial analog stick. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* editors awarded *Wave Race 64* "Sports Game of the Year" and a runner-up for "Nintendo 64 Game of the Year," citing the realistic physics and variety of tracks.

In the following years, *Wave Race 64* would find itself on several top 100 (#37 IGN Top 100 Games of All Time, 2005), top 50 (#20, *Next Generation,* February 1999), and other greatest-games lists generated between 1997 and 2006. The success of *Wave Race 64* led to *Wave Race: Blue Storm* (2001), a launch title for the GameCube. Once again, the franchise presented exceptional physical effects, including complex weather systems and water physics.



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FUN FACT:

Composer Kazumi Totaka's name carries slight infamy now for his inclusion of a 19-note melody called "Totaka's Song" in many of his games. Wave Race 64 is among the few games in his portfolio of 20-plus titles that doesn't contain the song.

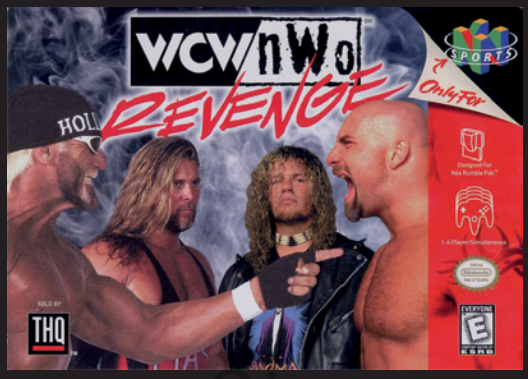
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Wave Race 64 strikes an amazing balance between the simplicity of old-fashioned arcade entertainment with first-of-its-kind water physics technology. It is a critical demonstration of the Nintendo 64's power at the time of its launch. It was loads of fun to play then and remains so today.

—Matt Raithel, studio director, Graphite Lab; professor of practice of game design, Maryville University

CHAPTER 97

WCW/NWO REVENGE



NINTENDO 64
GENRE: SPORTS/WRESTLING
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: ASMIK ACE ENTERTAINMENT / AKI CORPORATION
1–4 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1998

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Throughout my four-plus decades in this world, I have never ceased to be amazed by the unique times and places in which I have been introduced to video games that have affected me profoundly. In this particular instance, it was in October 2000 while visiting family just outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. My brother, Dan, and I had been toiling away at honing our skills on *WWF War Zone* and its frequently frustration-inducing controls ever since I had acquired my Nintendo 64 four months prior.

Along with the console and *WWF War Zone*, I had also purchased two other pro wrestling titles, *ECW Hardcore Revolution* and *WCW/nWo Revenge*. With Dan and I both being rabid wrestling fans and the infamous "Monday Night Wars" still ongoing, it only seemed natural to pick up titles representing all three of the top wrestling promotions at the time. Upon arriving at my grandfather's house and setting up the N64 in the living room, Dan decided to finally take a stand. He had his fill of *WWF War Zone* and wanted to take a break from it and move on to one of the other two games. Sensing that his fatigue with the *War Zone* grind that prompted this declaration had been building for some time, I obliged without resistance. What neither he nor I could have foreseen at the time was that once he placed the *WCW/nWo Revenge* cartridge into my N64, *WWF War Zone* would never see another moment of play by either of us.

To say that we were both blown away by this game would be a gross understatement. The depth of the character roster alone was tantamount to finding an oasis after a long desert trudge. Boasting more than 60 playable characters, *WCW/nWo Revenge* is a late 1990s wrestling fan's dream. From hard-hitting heavyweights to high-flying cruiserweights, there is a character to suit anyone's stylistic and aesthetic preferences.

The graphics and sound were a treat for our weary eyes and ears. In place of the generic arenas and rings seen in previous wrestling games, *WCW/nWo Revenge* offers a selection of settings, from the weekly set of Monday Nitro to the hallowed backdrops of legendary annual blockbuster events such as SuperBrawl and Starrcade. Seeing one's favorite wrestlers enter the arena, complete with pyrotechnics, is a treat to behold. While the game does not feature each wrestler's specific entrance theme, the original music tracks are energetic and in keeping with the era.

As far as Dan and I were concerned, the game's biggest leap forward in comparison to its contemporaries undoubtedly surrounded the control scheme. One of the time-tested hallmarks of a great game is that it is simple to pick up and play, yet challenging to master. The control scheme for *WCW/nWo Revenge* embodies this concept. Gone are the aforementioned rage-inspiring fighting-game-style button combos of *WWF War Zone*, and in their place a widely varied array of slams, suplexes, splashes, and submission holds that one can execute with relative ease and consistency.

From a gameplay standpoint, *WCW/nWo Revenge* offers a healthy variety of alternatives. The one-on-one

and tag team match options found in the Exhibition mode feature one-off matches that are beneficial for newcomers just getting their bearings, or for anyone seeking a bit of wrestling fun without a significant time investment. The Special Match mode features two additional match types: the Handicap Match and the Battle Royal. The Handicap Match sets up a two-versus-one scenario in which the player can choose to stand alone against the odds or stack them in their favor. The Battle Royal match offers the experience of one against all comers, where the player can face the challenge of up to 39 other wrestlers. Last, the Championship mode lets the player face a gauntlet of nine consecutive matches to vie for one of five title belts: the World Tag Team Championship, the World Cruiserweight Championship, the World Television Championship, the United States Heavyweight Championship, and the World Heavyweight Championship.

Ultimately, what becomes clearly evident when playing *WCW/nWo Revenge* is the sheer amount of painstaking effort that went into its development. In an interview featured in Patrick Hickey Jr.'s book *The Minds behind Sports Games: Interviews with Cult and Classic Video Game Developers* (2020, McFarland), former THQ producer Sanders Keel reverently described the impressive level of dedication and passion that he witnessed firsthand when visiting and collaborating with the Japanese development staff behind *WCW/nWo Revenge*:

> The team hardly slept and when they did it was just on a mat in the office. I had never seen such hard working developers, and it made sense, as they all loved wrestling. If I remember correctly, *Revenge* took about eight months. It was quite insane and a whole lot of fun.

Keel further recounted the lengths to which he and his team went to capture detail during the development process. "We were constantly going to Monday Nitro and the taped events in Orlando for photo shoots of the guys and their latest outfits," he said. "That is something that we started doing, which we hadn't seen much of, [which] was including multiple outfits and even for some including past gimmicks."

At first glance, the inclusion of additional ring attire may seem like a superficial benefit at best. However, in the pro wrestling world it is quite common for changes to be made to a wrestler's in-ring persona, or "gimmick" as it is often referred to, over the course of time. These changes can range from minor aesthetic alterations to a wrestler's appearance all the way up to a complete square-one redefinition of a wrestler's character, including a new name and backstory.

By going the extra distance and including different character variations for wrestlers where possible, Keel and his team added even-greater diversity and depth to the game's already stacked roster. Moreover, the additional character assortment, coupled with the allowance for the player to further alter the ring attire

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at will, paved the way for the immensely popular full-scale custom wrestler creation options featured within the titles that followed *WCW/nWo Revenge*.

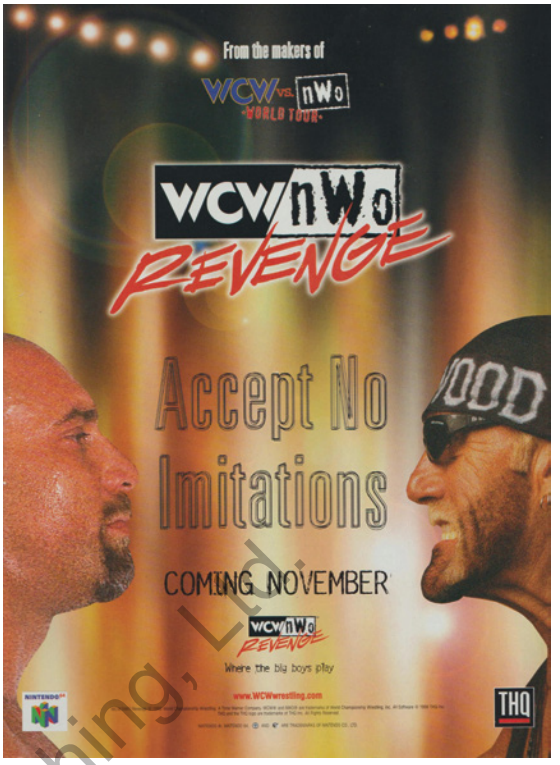
FUN FACT:

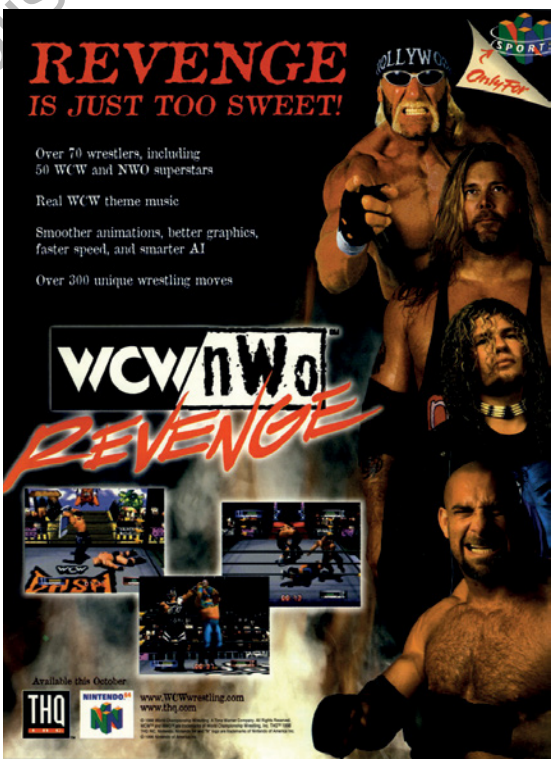
The most conspicuous absence from WCW/nWo Revenge's robust roster is that of wrestling legend "Nature Boy" Ric Flair, which is particularly odd, considering that he appeared in the game's immediate predecessor, WCW vs. nWo: World Tour. In the above-noted interview with Patrick Hickey Jr., Sanders Keel offered his recollection regarding the circumstances surrounding Flair's omission: "This was due to legal issues at the time," he said. "There was some sort of fallout and lawsuit, and it wasn't known if that was going to be settled. It was ongoing, so WCW made the choice not to allow him on the roster. Needless to say, THQ and AKI were really bummed about this."

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Besides being an incredibly fun game for both wrestling and nonwrestling fans alike, WCW/nWo Revenge established a new quality standard and became the launching point from which the wrestling video game boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s sprung, including massively popular successors such as WWF WrestleMania 2000 and WWF No Mercy.

—Matt Miller, video game world record holder, one-half of Team Mayh3m, featured in the Nintendo Quest documentary





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CHAPTER 98

WING COMMANDER III: HEART OF THE TIGER

3DO INTERACTIVE MULTIPLAYER
GENRE: SPACE COMBAT SIMULATOR
PUBLISHER: ORIGIN SYSTEMS
DEVELOPER: ORIGIN SYSTEMS
1 PLAYER
1995

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In August 1994, I purchased a Panasonic 3DO Interactive Multiplayer just so that I could play a *Mortal Kombat* clone called *Way of the Warrior*, which turned out to be a huge disappointment. To afford the super-expensive console, I sold my entire Sega Genesis and Sega CD collection. It was not worth it, and it made me angry for a long time. Relatively few of the games I purchased after that travesty of a one-on-one fighter made the 3DO worth owning until *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* was released. Being a fan of the previous games in the series, I was super stoked that the newest game in the franchise, which I had assumed was going to be a PC exclusive, was coming to my dopey little 3DO. I had high hopes that this new entry would be the killer app I was waiting for.

The first two games in the series (and their expansions) were outer-space dogfight sims where you pilot a fighter ship while destroying enemies, escorting convoys, and taking part in other random mission types. In between sorties you are treated to somewhat interactive animated cutscenes that advance the plot and characters. These cutscenes were cinematic in scope and were a step above what was normally seen on the consoles of the time, so I was really excited to see what this newest adventure had in store for me, due to the fact that the game came on four CDs.

Wing Commander III follows the exploits of Colonel Christopher "Maverick" Blair as he joins the crew of the TCS Victory to command a team of fighter pilots on the front lines of the Kilrathi War, which has been raging for the past 30 years. You meet and befriend other pilots, kindle a possible romance, expose a traitor, and take out wave upon wave of Kilrathi ships in the effort to end the war. The game is presented as an interactive movie experience. Instead of using animated cutscenes like in previous games in the series, it's now fully live action, featuring recognizable actors such as Mark Hamill, John Rhys-Davies, Jason Bernard, Malcolm McDowell, Josh Lucas, and former adult film star Ginger Lynn Allen in leading roles.

In a worldwide promotional campaign for *Wing Commander III*, Hamill spoke about how much he enjoyed appearing in the game:

> It's a job that didn't exist even five years ago. The main difference is the fact that the story can branch in different directions, different things can happen, so unlike a conventional script that has one story line. This one was great fun, and I actually looked forward to going to work because it was new, because it was something I hadn't done before.

Wing Commander III has impressive animatronic practical effects whenever the Kilrathi are involved, since they are a race of 8-foot-tall lion people. All the in-game graphics are polygons instead of pixels, another change from previous titles in the series. And somehow

the programmers were able to condense all the controls that would normally be assigned to the keys on a PC keyboard to the 3DO controller and still have it be easy to remember which button (sometimes a combination of buttons) does what.

The game exceeded all my expectations. Not only was it super immersive and told a wonderful story with twists and turns that shook me to my core (hey, it was 1995), the gameplay was more fun than it had ever been. Controlling your Excalibur heavy fighter (among the many combat craft available) was easy, and the sometimes strange button combinations required to fire missiles, lock on to a target, or even travel to the next sector took no time getting used to.

Fragging Kilrathi ships is satisfying, since they are shown to be horrific villains (what they did to Angel was effed up), and the relationship simulator segments are stressful at times because you never know what dialogue choice would upset a particular character. There are lots of choices in the game, and each one has serious consequences. Sometimes a beloved character might die, or your love interest might blow you off. It's a polished game that feels like it was made with a lot of heart and attention to detail. I loved every single second of it, and I finally felt that my purchase of the 3DO was well worth it.

It was such a showstopper of a game that when I showed it to a friend, he said, "Let's go to Best Buy NOW!" and he purchased the console—which by that time had dropped in price a little—and a copy of the game.

I still consider *Wing Commander III* to be one of the best games on the 3DO. When I got back into video game collecting in 2013 and decided that I was going to attempt to reclaim all the games I used to own for the console, the first one I tracked down was *Wing Commander III*. And I found that it holds up remarkably well. It's a fantastic game that I would recommend everyone play. (If you don't own a 3DO, you can also get it on the PlayStation.)

And then I repurchased a copy of *Way of the Warrior*. Because I'm a glutton for punishment.

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FUN FACT:

The live-action scenes in Wing Commander III cost $4 million to produce, for a total production cost of nearly $5 million. At the time of release it was the most expensive video game ever made . . . until Wing Commander IV: The Price of Freedom was released in 1996 with a budget of $10 million.

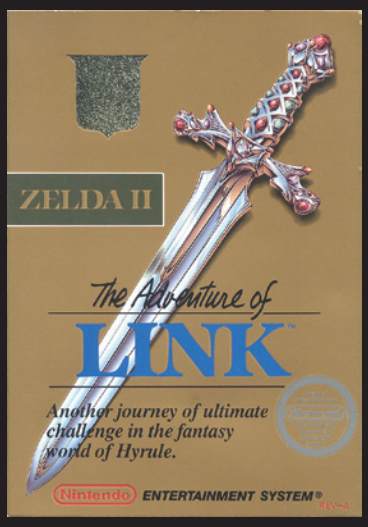
WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

Being a filmmaker, I really loved how Wing Commander III was presented as an interactive movie. I had never played anything like it before, since the gameplay sections were just as awesome as the full-motion video scenes. Usually those types of game are all about the FMV and barely about the gameplay.

—Christopher "the Old Ass Retro Gamer" Pico, filmmaker and gaming YouTuber

CHAPTER 99

ZELDA II: THE ADVENTURE OF LINK



NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D4
1 PLAYER
1988

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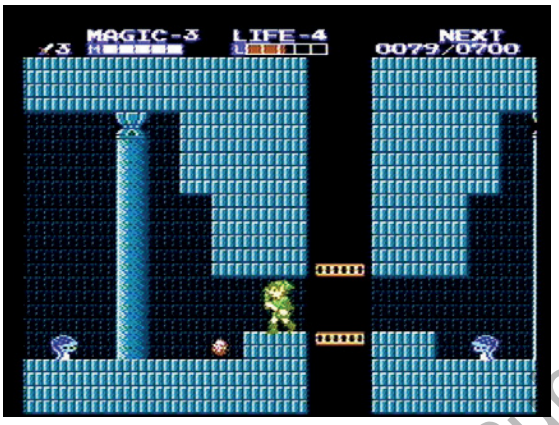
Zelda II: The Adventure of Link was one of the most anticipated games of 1988. Any kid at the time who had an NES and a subscription to *Nintendo Fun Club News* or *Nintendo Power* had been reading about the game for most of the year, and many were eager to get their hands on the sequel to one of the most popular NES games. Originally slated for a fall 1988 release, *Zelda II* was delayed until December of that year and released in limited quantities because of two infamous words: chip shortage.

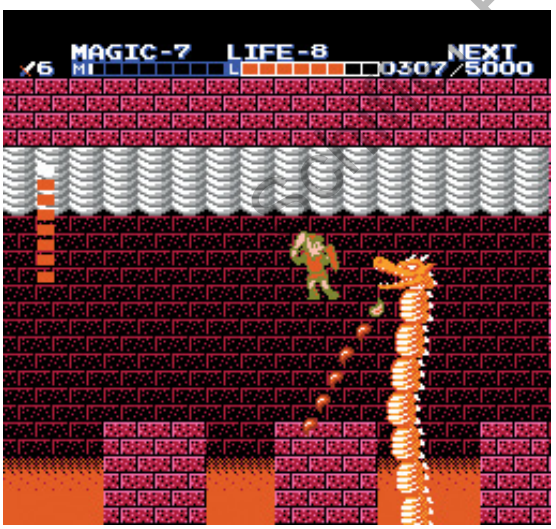
It's hard to discuss *Zelda II* without mentioning the computer chip shortage occurring at the time. Many people today might dismiss this as Nintendo creating a false supply issue to help raise demand for the game, but the chip shortage was real. According to a March 1988 issue of the *New York Times*, the shortage was blamed primarily on two things, the first being a 1986 trade agreement between the United States and Japan that was supposed to boost the chip-making market in the US and help end "unfair trade practices" by Japanese manufacturers. Because of this agreement, the Japanese government told its companies to limit their output. While this was happening, new production methods being implemented caused production to slow down even more. So, while it is easy to point at Nintendo in hindsight and say that "Nintendo's gonna Nintendo," that wasn't the case here.

Now, let's get into the game itself. *Zelda II* takes place six years after the events of *The Legend of Zelda*. According to the manual, Link discovers a mark on the back of his hand that looks like the crest of the kingdom as he approaches his 16th birthday. He shows this to Impa, the royal nursemaid, and she tells him of the "Legend of Zelda," in which the first Zelda was put into a deep sleep by a magician and has been asleep in a secret chamber ever since. It is now up to Link to find the third Triforce—the Triforce of Courage—to wake up the sleeping princess. In addition to Link being tasked with his new adventure, the minions of Ganon are out to kill Link and sprinkle his blood on the King of Evil's remains so that he can once again bring chaos and destruction to the Kingdom of Hyrule.

Much like two other popular sequels of the time, *Super Mario Bros. 2* and *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, *Zelda II* is a huge departure from its predecessor. While the game does have a pulled-back overhead view, the bulk of the game takes place in a side-scrolling environment. In addition to the new style of action, the game also introduces new RPG elements, such as you, as Link, being able to gain experience and level up certain attributes, including your health, attack power, and magic. The use of magic is new to the series, letting you boost your defense, cure yourself, or even turn into a fairy. Since the game is side scrolling, the battle system is very different from the first game.

Tadashi Sugiyama, one of the directors of the game, did a Q&A-style interview with Nintendo's Japanese website about the development of the game. According to a translated version of that interview, Sugiyama had this to say about the battle system: "Mr. Miyamoto said he wanted to make a side-scrolling action game that made use of up-and-down movements for attacks and defense. It's rooted in actions such as jump strikes, downward strikes, and high- and low-shield defense moves. Types of moves that weren't possible in the first game."





Extreme challenge is one of the other legacies of this game. If you look up a YouTube review of *Zelda II* or read a modern article about it, chances are the game's difficulty level will be discussed. When I got the game for my birthday when I was a kid, I was fortunate enough that my parents also got me a related gaming magazine as well. The volume 2, number 3 issue of *Game Player's Strategy Guide to Nintendo Games* had almost an entire walk-through of the game, derived from the most-asked *Zelda II* questions that the magazine had received. "Where do I find the hammer?" "Where is the sixth Palace?" "How do I get to the final boss in the Great Palace?" Thanks to my thorough perusal of the magazine, I had the answers to these questions and more. This was a huge help in navigating through the game, which is one of its most challenging elements.

In the interview referenced above, Sugiyama was asked about the game's exceptionally high difficulty level. "It's difficult?" he said, laughing. "The foundation of action games at the time was to feel difficult for everyone. Games didn't have a ton of content at that time, so to have them played for as long as possible we felt like we couldn't make them easily clearable. We also did debugging, so we would play a game too much and the game would have a high difficulty that was interesting to us. One thing I remember is a call we received from a customer at the time. He said that he just couldn't beat the final boss. We talked with him and found out he was fully equipped, so we had to tell him he could only rely on his skill at that point. A pretty tough answer, right?"

I guess at the time they didn't know about the trick of ducking in the corner and stabbing repeatedly.

Regardless of the degree of difficulty or how you prepare to play the game—whether you are equipped with tips, tricks, and walk-throughs or not—*Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* is one of the best games of the 8-bit era.

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FUN FACT:

Rather than being a continuation of the series, Zelda II began as a new sword-and-shield type of action game, so the development team didn't have the original Legend of Zelda in mind during the beginnings of the creation process. Also, despite the computer chip shortage at the time, Zelda II went on to sell 4.38 million copies worldwide, so the game is hardly rare.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

While some gamers today view Zelda II as the mere black sheep of the series and too hard to consider playing, it remains a great game that is challenging, rewarding, and fun. It also has an excellent soundtrack.

—John Trenbeath, co-organizer of Gaming-4Guts charity marathon, cohost of the Bits and Pieces podcast

CHAPTER 100

ZOMBIES ATE MY NEIGHBORS

SUPER NINTENDO / SEGA GENESIS
GENRE: OVERHEAD-VIEW ACTION/SHOOTER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: LUCAS ARTS
1 OR 2 PLAYERS (SIMULTANEOUS)
1993

It seems like zombies have taken over video games. You can find them in places you would expect (horror exploration games), in places where they make sense (dystopic adventure and role-playing games), and in places where they appear to be added on for no other reason than to enliven and differentiate the product (World War II–era shooters).

When I think of zombie games, an older title immediately springs to mind: *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*. Lucas Arts developed the title for the Super Nintendo and ported it to the Sega Genesis. Konami released the game in 1993. Reviewers generally praised it, with the SNES cartridge lauded as being the better version, thanks in part to sharper graphics, more colors, and better sounds. But it was not a massive seller—exact numbers aren't available, but it is known that it did not top one million in sales on either platform. Still, the game has become a cult classic.

I got into the 16-bit video game generation unintentionally. When I went to visit my sister's family for Thanksgiving in 1995, I talked them out of an old TI-99/4A computer, which was the plan, but I also left with a Super Nintendo and a Genesis. My cousins had traded almost their entire collection for those two systems to get games for their new Sony PlayStation, but the local shop would not take the consoles themselves (as well as a few common titles), so I suddenly had two more gaming devices.

I hit the local flea markets and swap meets the following spring, looking for any classic-era games that I could find. One day, I was walking past a seller with more-recent games when my neighbor who accompanied me on this trek noticed *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* for the Super Nintendo on the seller's table. He told me that I had to get it. I took his advice and made the purchase. And I am glad that I listened to him.

Given the limited number of games that I had for the SNES, *Zombies* got quite a bit of play. I never got very good at it, since I barely reached five of the 55 levels (including bonus stages), but I always enjoyed playing it. First and foremost, the game had solid mechanics. You use environmental weaponry to battle zombies and other creatures to survive. But you have to rescue at least one of your neighbors to reach the next level.

This emphasis on protecting people rather than just eliminating enemies means the game is not a standard run-and-gun shooter. Instead, it requires exploration and experimentation. Some doors require keys. Some environments can be destroyed. Some items are hidden in chests and drawers. Some enemies are more susceptible to specific weapons.

The game also has a strong co-op mode. There are two protagonists: Zeke and Julie. You can play as either, or both can be played in the two-player mode (there is no way to select two Zekes or two Julies).

During the 16-bit era, there were a lot of third-person shooter games and "couch co-ops" from which to choose. What set *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* apart was its presentation. It has a broad color pallet, rather than the dark-and-moody tones or earthen shades of gray, green, and ground associated with horror and shooter games, respectively. The enemies are cartoon versions of horror movie standards: zombies, evil dolls, mum-

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mies, vampires, werewolves, chain-saw maniacs, sea monsters, blobs, spores, pods, and the like.

Many of the weapons are what you would expect to find around the suburban neighborhood where the game takes place. This includes squirt guns, soda pop cans, fire extinguishers, weed eaters, dinnerware, and food, among other items. Special weapons include bazookas, artifacts, and a hidden flamethrower that was available only in the SNES version. There are keys to unlock doors and potions to heal or transform.

We've seen many of these things in previous video games, but the "neighbors" make the game unique. They cover almost every suburban trope from the 1990s. The cheerleaders are worth the most points—but they can be tough to rescue because they jump high as they cheer. The old school teacher who enjoys failing students is worth the least. There is also a dancing baby, a barking dog, a man grilling, a man on an inner tube in his pool, a pair of lost tourists, an explorer, and a soldier.

This lighthearted presentation sets this game apart from the standard science-fiction shooter based in a space station or the typical horror survival game set in a cemetery. The Nintendo censorship of the era works to the advantage of the SNES version, since the absence of blood and the presence of purple ooze that covers the screen at "Game Over" seem much more in line with the overall aesthetic of the game than the more "realistic" red that covers the screen in the Genesis version.

In some European countries there was additional censorship to tone down the "violence." These changes further reinforced the title's absurd tone. The title was changed to "Zombies" (sans "Ate My Neighbors") and the chain-saw maniac became a crazed lumberjack. Also, the endgame screen oozed green in the SNES version (though it remained red in the Genesis version).

In an interview published on gamasutra.com, the game's lead designer, Mike Ebert, spoke about the origins of the game. "I knew some 'C' [code], so during my free time I started making all sorts of strange graphics demos and games. One of the demos was a side-scrolling save-the-people-from-the-monsters demo that would later evolve into *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*," which he changed into a top-down game due to his love of *Robotron* and *Smash T.V.*, two of his "favorite arcade games of all time."

While the change to a top-down perspective was crucial, resource management was even more important. "Use as few weapons [as possible] early on so that later you have plenty of weapons to defeat the harder levels," he said. "The aspect of keeping the neighbors alive made for interesting twists in strategies. The more neighbors you keep alive, the longer it takes to save them on each level, also the more resources you use to save them. You can keep fewer neighbors alive, have less to save, use less [*sic*] resources, but then you risk losing the game if your total drops to zero."

Zombies Ate My Neighbors is approachable for newcomers while at the same time offering strategic options because of the varied weapons, items, and enemies. As such, you have a title that remains as playable today as it was when released nearly 30 years ago.

In 2021, *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* was ported to the Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows PC, and Xbox One. It included such modern features as a quick-save system and achievements. It also featured behind-the-scenes galleries with game art, and a video interview with the developers of the original game.

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FUN FACT:

Since Zombies Ate My Neighbors started as a Super Nintendo title, the control scheme fully utilized the system's controller. It used Y and B to use and change the regular weapon, X and A to use and change the special item, the shoulder buttons to activate (or deactivate) the radar on the heads-up display (HUD), and the d-pad to move.

Porting the game to the Genesis meant changes in the control scheme, since the standard controller had only three buttons. As a result, players had to use two-button combinations (A-B and A-C) to change the regular weapon and special item, respectively, while B used the weapon and C used

the item. (Those with the six-button controller could use the standard layout from the SNES and even select which group of four buttons they wanted to use.)

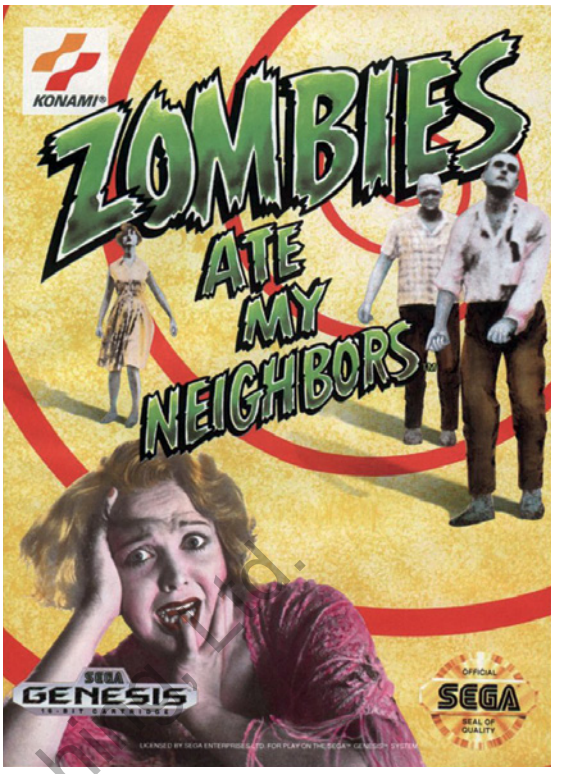
Also, the game display on the Genesis is reminiscent of an early 1980s arcade machine, with the right side of the game screen being used to display player score, status, and the radar—rather than the less obtrusive HUD from the SNES version.

WHY IT MADE THE LIST:

The mechanics of Zombies Ate My Neighbors can be found in other games. From Ghoul Patrol (from the same developer, which used the same game engine and the same lead characters) just one year later, to the in-development indie offering of Demons Ate My Neighbors, there have been many attempts at doing a third-person rescue shooter.

But none of them have matched the original in terms of combining style and gameplay. Some have relied too much on certain gameplay mechanics, such as needing to unlock doors. Others have stressed style over substance, such as putting too much emphasis in the artwork or in the weaponry. Others have changed the formula too much, such as taking away the process of moving through levels. The result has been that the copies have generally fallen flat and failed to produce the same insane experience as the original. Zombies Ate My Neighbors was first—and it is still the best.

—Michael Dougherty, video game player and collector since Pong, freelance writer since 1980



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